

KNIGHTS OF THE DARK TOWER

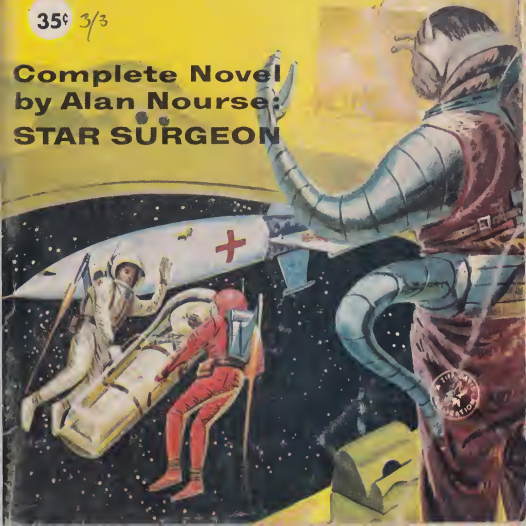
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E d i t o r i a l

I DON'T know how many magazines of the venerable (for science fiction) age of AMAZING can report they have been in correspondence with a reader who remembers Vol. 1, No. 1. But we have, and pleasantly so, and we thought you might like to hear about it.

Walter X. Osborn, 85, who runs a woodcraft shop in Zambales, the Philippine Islands, read Vol. 1, No. 1 in the public library at St. Louis, Mo., in 1926. Since then Mr. Osborn has read every issue of the magazine except for those published during the three years he was a Japanese prisoner-of-war. (Aside to collectors: his very early issues were lost, his pre-war issues destroyed during the war, and most of the post-1945 issues demolished by "insects and humidity.")

We asked Mr. Osborn to tell us which story in AMAZING's quarter-of-a-century history he liked best. "I can't remember the 'best,'" he answered. "But one of the best certainly is 'The Green Man Returns,' by Harold M. Sherman, in the Dec., 1947, issue—which I have in very good condition, by the way." The worst? No hesitancy by reader Osborn there: the Shaver mysteries.

We've no desire to pat ourselves on the back, but we thought you'd be interested in veteran reader Osborn's comments on trends in science fiction:

"The proper function of a magazine of science fiction is, first, to entertain. Second, to print stories that are logical and have a reasonable possibility [of happening]. In some of the other science fiction magazines stories are printed that suggest that both the authors who write them and the editors who print them should visit a psychiatrist . . . Because it prints *stories*, not vague psychological studies, I still think AMAZING is the best of all the science fiction magazines."

To reader Osborn, 85 and still going strong, we say thanks, and many more years of stimulating reading!—NL

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AM 12-9

PHANTOM FOOT

By
PHYLLIS GOTLIEB



*The line between reality and illusion
is never clear. But in the wardroom,
sweating, the men of the starship
waited for the Qumedni to show
them which was which.*

PHELPS was in the dayroom watching Beal and Twelv-trees playing *blitz*, a roughhouse performed in a six-foot chalked circle, crouching in the sumo position, but with pronged fingers aimed and darting. It was stuffy, and suddenly their grunts

and jibes, their glistening shoulders and the clang and shuffle of heavy boots on steel plates oppressed Phelps and he turned away and reached up for a stereo reel. There was a gasp and thud and when he turned around Twelvetrees was doubled up on

the floor, choking, most of his body well outside the circle. Beal gaped and shuddered, pulling deep breaths and rubbing sweaty hands on his chest.

"Pay up, boy, I got you square."

"Hell with you." Twelvetrees bent over his doubled arms, winded and nauseated.

"Sell your butterfly collection," Beal snickered. "Borrow from Towser!" He roared with laughter that broke and redoubled from the metal walls. Phelps rubbed his leg and wished he were elsewhere, wished there were a big enough elsewhere on this cramped ship to give him privacy and silence for his ravaged body and nerves. His fear.

Beal turned. His glance touched contemptuously on Phelps for an instant, then passed and rested on Dionisi, who had accommodated his shoulders to the corner of the room and was drawing the last sustenance from a mangled cigarette butt.

"Come on, Kos! Play the winner."

Dionisi took the butt out of his mouth and said, "No thanks, I don't like your style." He glanced covertly at Phelps and dropped the butt down the airsuck. Phelps parted his lips to rap out in his best voice: "You are aware, Dionisi, that Regulation 86/493a expressly forbids—" but he recollected what and where he was and kept silent.

Beal's eyes narrowed. "And you're supposed to be such a hot-shot! You weren't so particular

when you knifed Halloran in the sweepstake on the *Nicholas of Cusa*."

Dionisi fished out a cigarette. "You are mistaken. He pulled a knife on me. I killed him with my hands. And got suspended for it."

Beal said, "He ain't around to talk about it, and you got plenty of money out of that deal." A springknife flicked its blade out of his closed hand. "I think you ought to play blitz with me, Kos."

Phelps found his voice. "Stop it, Beal, put it away before it gets bent. We're going into orbit in an hour and we need Dionisi."

Kosta Dionisi grinned. "Yes, Beal, I am a very valuable member of the crew."

"Yeah," Beal stowed his knife away, "an you'll make as pretty a lookin' deader as the rest of us." He tossed Twelvetrees a shirt and buttoned on his own. Turning, he found his target in Phelps. "You're pale, Joe. You're shakin' like a leaf. What in hell's name made you volunteer?"

"I didn't," said Phelps. "I didn't volunteer at all." He limped out of the room, and when he was in the passageway with the door closed behind him he leaned weakly against the wall.

The *Cayley & Sylvester* went into orbit. Like a yoyo going round-the-world it wheeled, centering on the planet Qumedon and waiting.

Towers faced Phelps across the go-board in his cabin. The board was a magnetic slab with black and white metallic stones.

Towers was a 7th Class player, but he was not in the dedicated mood necessary for spending two or three days over a game. He doubted he would be alive that long. He faced Phelps wishing he had something more than empathetic feeling for this thin-lipped, white-lashed shadow. He had been against taking him on with the crew, but in such a small ship there was no other arrangement possible; he could think of half-a-dozen thick-headed louts who could have done the work better and perhaps proven more useful in the end. But the choice had been made for him.

The ship's chronometer said that the time was 1934 hours, on the 59th day out. The ship had been in orbit for two hours.

Towers said, "That means we have anywhere up to twelve hours."

"Anywhere at all," said Phelps, retracting his last move.

Towers was annoyed, but there was nothing to do but wait, and nothing mattered. To conceal his annoyance he pulled a turnip-shaped chronometer out of his pocket and studied it. "Five-ten p.m. Earth-EST," he said. "My four kids are sitting in a row in front of the TV watching *Jett Winslow of the Solar Patrol* and wishing they were out fighting ten-legged Vegans."

"I haven't even that," said Phelps. Towers sighed, and fished his mind in vain to find something worthwhile in himself, his work, his mission,—and Phelps. The veined hands, pale blue eyes,

pale-red hair cut close to the scalp, all seemed compounded of raw flayed nerve. At home he might well have been at ease as a stalker of errors in a roomful of IBM machines. As a conscript on the *Cayley & Sylvester*, sunk in apathy and self-pity and yet the only survivor of contact with the Qumedni — Towers would have preferred the company of Beal and Twelvetrees, whom he considered worthless in any other context.

Air pulsed, refreshing itself, through the arteries of the ship with a faint but pervasive noise; the magnetic board pulled at the descending stones with an unpleasant snick; Phelps rubbed his leg and a roughness in his fingers rasped on his trouser-leg. A flaw in the airconditioning which Towers had cursed a thousand times pulled in rowdy voices from the messroom in one of the endless variations of the Battle Hymn of the Republic:

"She went into the water and she
got her thighs all wet,

But she didn't get her (clap,
clap) wet, yet!"

Yet he would not have told them to shut up.

The intercom buzzed. Towers glanced at Phelps. Aside from Dionisi, up with the instruments, there was no-one else but the voices and their muffled bellowing. He pressed a button.

"Dionisi?"

"They—it's here, sir."

Towers thought the voice

trembled. "Exactly what are you trying to tell me, Dionisi?" He spoke softly; he was called Tower-ser because of his bite.

"The Qumedni ship is pacing us, sir—just as Phelps described it." He gave the co-ordinates in a calmer voice.

"Stay on autopilot and come down here in ten minutes," said Towers. "Bring the others."

He turned: "You're sure now we have a little time, half an hour at least?"

Phelps twisted in his chair. "Two hours, more like." The voices in the messroom stopped, leaving a gaping hole of silence beyond the other noises.

"Leg bother you?" Towers asked, to fill the emptiness with the sense of familiar human kind.

"No more than usual. Nerves. I get, you know, the feel of the foot . . . I had a sore gall under one ankle . . ." He brushed a beading of sweat from his upper lip.

"Why don't you take it off? You won't get much of a chance . . ." He cleared away the *go-set* while Phelps loosened his laces.

"I don't like—" he began.

"Don't worry, just go ahead." Towers gave him a brief, rare grin, then he caught sight of the chronometer. At home it was 5.29, and on TV red, green, and yellow Chucklies were popping musically in the cereal bowl. He crammed the turnip in his pocket and yanked levers that did away with the bunk, washstand, and table. Phelps pulled off his shoe

and the aluminum foot inside it and rubbed his leg in its white stump sock, marked with the constrictions of the laces.

"Here come the sentences," said Towers.

There were four tense faces in front of him. The crew knew almost as much as Towers; there was not much to know. The spread of information had not been encouraged, though there had been rumors of sealed orders. Towers himself had not been inclined to batter Phelps with questions.

Now he said, "You know we were sent here to contact the Qumedni and that three ships were lost trying."

They shifted uneasily.

"Nobody's ever said what happened to them ships," said Beal. "Sir?"

"They blew up," said Towers matter of factly.

Beal screwed his eyes up and pawed his bristled cheek. "But if we gotta fight—we ain't armed. Sir? How can you expect—"

"The Qumedni don't attack with guns," said Phelps.

Three pairs of eyes turned toward him. "There's your sealed orders," said Towers. "If there's anything you want to know, ask Phelps. He's the only one alive who knows anything about the Qumedni."

They were too far gone in familiarity to assume respect at this point; Dionisi said, "If it is so difficult how have you gotten all of this information?"

"I was the captain of the third ship," said Phelps.

"A thousand years ago a Qumedni ship crashed on Bellisarius VI. The crew died but the log and a couple of other records had been stored in a kind of safe and were found almost intact. The Bellisarii had never been contacted by them before, and it was believed they meant to stop for repairs and try to leave without being seen. This story was dug up about twenty-five years ago by one of our expeditions, but we weren't the first to try to visit the Qumedni."

"What've they got that we want?" asked Twelvetrees.

"Technology. Of course you can't get much technology from a simple record like a log-book, but the account of places visited and distances covered is unbelievable. They've gotten out of the super-galaxy—perhaps even into other dimensions. Peoples of far greater technical development than ours have tried to establish relationships with them, but they have all been held at arms' length, as we are now. They seem to want to keep to themselves."

There were many times in his twenty years with the Service when Towers had felt that the planetary peoples touched by Earth ought to have been allowed to keep to themselves; and this was damned well one of them. But it was not a thought to speak aloud.

Dionisi said suddenly, "I think we have nothing they want."

"That's a point," said Phelps.

"It'd be damned hard to establish a trading basis. But contact comes first. There's no room for one of the usual formal contacts; here we've got to play it as it comes."

"What do they look like?" asked Beal.

Phelps shook his head. "From what we've been able to gather they've got the arrangement fairly common in intelligent forms: a head with senses, prehensile limbs. They live in an oxygen atmosphere so they probably don't look like octopuses, but whether they've got six legs and fur like a bear, or warts like a toad, we just don't know. But they are telepathic—and they have other psi powers." He paused, and his face became drawn. "Their whole world—they have a kind of corporate awareness, each person a member cell. They have, also, a cruel humor."

"Killing people is not humor," said Dionisi.

"It is certainly not," said Phelps, staring him full in the face. Dionisi flushed.

Towers said, "You'd think that if they were so sensitive that itself would preclude cruelty of any kind."

"When I was being put through Psych — afterwards — they said that degree of empathy could kill off a race in two generations. Corporate awareness doesn't mean they give a damn for any one individual's troubles." Phelps regarded the blank faces of the crew members.

"Their coarseness is a kind of tranquilizer that lets them register the pain without being disturbed by it. That's why it's their technology we're worrying about, and not their art or their philosophy." He rubbed his stumped leg and tucked it under the whole one.

"Now I'll tell you what happens. They pace a ship, as they're doing now, and send out telepathic feelers. They play a few table-rapping tricks to get us off guard, then they probe and find out what makes us tick." He shrugged. "Nobody's ever lasted past that."

"But if you say they don't attack," said Beal, "how did the ships—"

Phelps read the faces carefully. "The men blew up the ships themselves."

Impassive, Dionisi poured out a round of coffee from the pot on the desk.

"That's why we haven't got weapons," said Towers. "Reduces the possible." He himself had never been able to gather from Phelps what those possibilities were, what form the madness would take to make men blow up their ship.

"Nerves," said Phelps; his eyes became vague. "They seem to pick at the weakness . . ."

The men twisted in their chairs, rustled their dry palms together in the silence to make sounds and senses fortified by ancient and recognizable laws. Phelps pulled himself together.

"When we were going through all that, something . . . went wrong with the reactor. The others were—weren't in any condition to go in after it, so I got into an all-purpose suit to have a go at it myself, but soon as I got the suit on the ship blew up. I was blown clear, but a piece of the hull sheared my foot off. The suit sealed it and I radioed—they found me two days later. That's it." His flat dry voice broke off like a biscuit, and he leaned back, licking his lips.

"Time for one more question, not too long," said Towers. "Anybody?"

"I have a short one," said Dionisi. He turned slate eyes toward the captain. "Out of those volunteers, why did you choose us, particularly, sir?"

Towers hesitated. Dionisi was the best pilot he had ever known, but what was more, a person who held a very strong and simple view of a world which had never treated him kindly: life was hell, but it was not necessary to behave like a devil. Towers felt that was as strong a protection as anybody could wish for this task. He had chosen Beal and Twelvetimes because they were a pair of roving mohawks with thick wits and superb reflexes. But while he was puzzling over what to say aloud, he was spared the trouble, because the lights went out.

"Just sit tight," said Phelps tensely. Twelvetimes cackled, "Quick, Harry, the weeje board!" and there was a murmur of laughter. Then the lights went

on again and they looked at each other. They waited like a man in a dentist's chair watching the dentist's hand hovering over a row of drills. The papers on Towers' desk began a rise and stir, eddied once like leaves and settled in their accustomed places. The Qumedon force ransacked the place lightly, touching and turning the properties as though it were searching for a map or key.

And all at once there was nothing.

It was the night before take-off. Dionisi took a woman up a hill under a red August moon that hung over ripe fields. At the foot of the hill the mist was so thick it broke against their lips in invisible droplets. But they scrambled up hand in hand by chance footholds, and at the top it was clear. The fields spread out around them broken by thickets of fir that turned ghost under the shifting mist. He set out his coat and they sat on it. After he had kissed her she laid the flat of the hand on his chest and he could feel his heart plunging against it. His heartbeat, he thought, was more articulate than his tongue. Her hand moved to his face.

"Don't go, Kos. Not now when things are like this. You mustn't leave me. Stay here."

"But I will come back; I always come."

But she shook her head, shivering and clasping her arms. "I'm frightened."

"You're cold," he said. And covered her with his body.

On the night before take-off Beal was lying on the bed in a cheap hotel room. Under the bed there was a pile of whiskey bottles that spilled out against his shoes and the clothes he had dumped on the floor; there was only the miasmic light from a parchment-shaded lamp in a porcelain wall bracket. He was conscious, but paralyzed with drink, and every once in a while his consciousness took a dip into the interior darkness, pulling all his senses reeling with it. The blinded window flickered as though there were flames encroaching against it, and he heard sirens in the street. A terror welled in his throat but he was unable to lift a finger. Presently he saw a something growing in the corner of the ceiling where the light was too feeble to reach, a smoke, a shadow under the buckled wallpaper. It grew, red and purple, writhing at times, running down in streaks like ink. Beal would have screamed, but he could hardly croak.

"I got the d.t.'s," he whispered.

The stain widened and spread; the light began to grow dim; as the room darkened the thing grew phosphorescent, the ancient glue of the wallpaper parted and cracked under the pressure. He knew that the light would go out, he knew that as it failed the paper would swell and burst, and the thing with its horrid glow would reach slimy tentacles and

engulf him. And still he could not move.

Twelvetrees helped his mother serve supper to his four younger brothers and his three younger sisters, and gave a hand with the dishes when it was all done. He was touching those thick cracked mugs and blue-rimmed plates for perhaps the last time, but that was how it went. After the younger ones had been sent to bed his mother put on her good black dress and pinned on a hat with raveled veiling. "I'm going to church, Roger. If you go out don't forget your key."

"No, Ma."

He watched TV and leafed through a magazine for a while, then he got up and put on a leather jacket. His brother Herbert looked up reproachfully from his welter of glue-tubes and the half-completed model of the *Nicholas of Cusa*. "What's the matter?" he asked. "You so sick of our faces you can't stay around for a little while on your last night?"

Twelvetrees turned at the door. "If you were leaving the Earth and 'd probably never be back, you might want to see a little bit of it before you went, too." He closed the door on his brother's shocked face. He'd never said anything like that before, but what the hell!—it was no joke. And Herbert wouldn't tell their mother. Anyway, she always half-expected it with every trip, or thought she did. She was sure it was a deadly sin for Man to

leave the earth and poke his nose in the heavens, and if the Lord had wanted Man to, etc. But as a widow with eight children she was glad to accept a good share of his pay.

Tonight there was plenty of money left to do what he wanted. He walked rapidly down toward the waterfront. Earlier there had been foghorns, and a close red sullen moon, but as the evening wore on the moon paled and receded till it stood white as salt against the basalt of the heavens. He had ridden in those heavens; he had crossed the deserts of that moon. It was a place like any other: good or bad they were the same to him. Yet it made a pretty light on the water. He stood on a bridge and watched, first the moon and then the colored lights of the dance-hall down along the curve of the shore. Those lights glittered on the water richer than the colored stars he had passed in ships. He would find a girl down there, they would drink and make love, and he would waken with the taste of the Scotch tightly coated against his palate; it was what he had to have once more. Yet he waited for a while, watching the multiple fold and flow of the moonlit water. He was very much alone.

Towers sat up quite late with his wife and four children. They stayed in the living-room watching green flames in the fireplace that were chemical, but still as warm and bright as any that had lit the arthritic passions of men

in caves. He wanted to go to bed with his wife, and yet he wanted to see the children as long as possible, so he sat there, watching the children as they drowsed in front of the flickering light.

Then suddenly it seemed to him, perhaps by a trick of the light, that he could see his children's thoughts rising above their heads in the warm air, as heat-waves rise from half-melted asphalt on a hot day. They were simple thoughts depicted in primary colors, and mostly meretricious. He smiled at them. From the baby's rose-and-gold head came the dream of a large doll with a curly wig. One child formulated a devious plan to forestall a bully who had designs on his coptercycle. Another planned to negotiate a loan from his father, down payment on a second-hand chronometer he needed very badly to be able to tell at any given moment the exact time at any spot on Mars or Venus. Smiling, Towers turned to his wife to remark on this amazing vision; and he saw that she too had thoughts, moving in a cloud over her head. She was thinking that tomorrow night she would see her lover.

And Phelps—

Dionisi laughed. "No, no, you cannot catch me that way," he told the invisible Qumedni, and the rest of the men looked up, dazed and blinking. For a moment they swam together in the bowl of their accumulated mind, and each knew the thoughts of

everyone. They laughed with him, a little stiffly, trying to orient the truth of what had happened with the twisted visions the Qumedni had tried to unbalance them with.

It seemed funny enough to Dionisi. On the night before take-off he had picked up a tramp at the corner bar; later, she had picked his pocket while he slept. He woke up neither surprised nor disappointed to find his wallet gone; it was what happened to Kosta Dionisi. He laughed: poor tramp with her handful of silver!—he had hidden his folding money and spaceman's papers under a loose tile in the shower-stall.

Beal was puzzled and insulted. He had actually celebrated his departure by rolling two drunks on Main Street as a valedictory gesture to his old home town. He had given Officer Martinez the slip, hired a Fli-Rite from the local U-Drive-it, killed a mickey on the way to the rocket port, made a perfect landing, and slept sweetly in the best hotel-room available. He didn't know what had prompted that horror—unless . . . there was an experiment he had tried when he was fifteen that—ugh!—he clasped his head in his hands.

Twelvetrees opened and closed his eyes dreamily. Neither imaginative nor guilt-ridden, he had relived his evening truly.

Towers, for a moment, fought agonizing doubt. His children's thoughts had been pictured accurately, perhaps, but his wife's? He had been married seventeen

years, but he still considered her as beautiful a woman as he could want. In the first of those years he had tortured himself with jealousy, but the love and intimacy they had built with whatever time they had—if all those years of mutual trust were nothing—Then he smiled at a sudden memory. He had watched her face, thoughtful in the firelight and asked, "What are you thinking of?"

She grinned. "My secret lover."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, besides that, your farewell dinner. That sirloin tip—would you rather have it as an oven roast with garlic, or a pot-roast with bayleaf and cloves?"

He laughed. "Sweetheart, you just come up to bed with me now and you can make it any way you damned well please!"

And Phelps—They turned to look at him. He had not been in the pool of their thoughts, he had been outside alone somewhere. He gripped the edge of his chair, his face was spastic, contorted tightly with bared teeth, contracted brows over eyes painfully squeezed shut. Towers wondered, was he in space with the shards of his exploded ship and the pain of his sheared leg?

He called sharply, "Phelps! Come out of it!"

Phelps came out slowly, relaxing grudgingly muscle by muscle with the almost audible wrench and strain of metal cooling from white hot. As his features loosen-

ed the flesh seemed to ebb away from the bones and the skin to contract till he had the pinched nose and upper jaw that rises from the mummy's skull. His mouth worked and he blinked; he passed his hand over his head—the skin shone with sweat under the close-cropped hair. He reached down slowly, half in dream, to find the contraption that housed his stump.

"I—" he began. But just as his fingers touched the edge of the corset the foot rose up and sailed across the room, striking and rebounding from the wall with a ringing that echoed deafeningly in the stillness, and then to the opposite wall and the ceiling, clang!—corset edges flapping, and the light tattoo of lace points.

"In the name of Heaven!" Phelps sat up, galvanized. The men stood and reached for it, but even though the ceiling was low it eluded them, slipped between their arms and flew, an ungainly albatross, lurching and crashing.

Towers remembered Phelps' earlier advice. "Stop! Don't go after it! Just sit tight and—" But Phelps, broken by whatever terrors had attacked him, was beyond that. Standing awkwardly on one foot, fists clenched, he cried out, "Stop it! Come back, damn you!"

The boot crashed and lurched. Phelps screamed in a high thin voice, "Give me back my foot!"

"Sit down," Towers ordered the others. He turned to Phelps: "You must stop it, man—"

"Shut up! Shut up!" Phelps

whispered. But he sat down. Towers took a deep breath. But Phelps groped with shaking fingers for his handkerchief. He grabbed one of the polythene cups from the desk, wadded the handkerchief into it and then crammed in his stump. "Verm-in!" he whispered, wincing. Then he got up and flung himself across the room, lurching more drunkenly, more crazily, than the foot he was trying to capture, shaking with the pain it cost him, shrieking in his cracking voice, "Gimme back my foot, do you hear, gimme back my foot!" There was a giggle of hysteria and someone moved to stop him. Towers' voice cut across the surge: "Stay still!" Each time the cup struck the floor they shivered. But Phelps went on yelling, "Give it back to me, give it—"

They gave him back his foot.

He stopped, choking on a sob of frightful impetus. He stood perfectly still. On the floor beside him lay the stump sock, the cup, the handkerchief. At the end of his leg there was a foot, made of flesh and bone, pink and new as a baby's. Under the outside ankle there was a small red raised lump, the gall he had complained of. He moved the toes.

All of them saw it at once, all remarked it in a second. But before the second had passed they knew something else. Each man raised his own left leg and found that there was no foot there. Sheared an inch above the ankle, it terminated in a stump, tightly

bound in ridged and livid scar over the shivered protruding bone-end.

Then they knew exactly what Phelps knew, and swung alone past the stars in forty-eight hours of pain and terror; each cut nerve-end telegraphed to the empty air beyond it that here had been a foot and all its experiences, treading cool water, spring and pressure of walking, day's weariness. Singly, each man might have borne it; together, their minds balked and sank. They opened their mouths to scream, but their risen gorges silenced them. Their mindless, soundless repulsion burst from them against the sides of the confining ship with the beat-beat-beat of an eye-winged moth in a cyanide jar.

Towers lashed up his consciousness, the essential *I am* that seemed oozing down a dark drain, poured over by a freshet of panic. He forced himself through a blind torrent that made him want to break the walls of the ship and find a suffocating freedom in raw space. Eyes up, away from the surrounding horror, he saw Phelps standing solidly on his two feet as though he were frozen in a camera's exposure.

Phelps' eyes were pools of icy calm. They said: revenge. Every insult he had suffered, or thought he suffered, seemed caught there: the broken ship, the days wheeling in space, the probing indignity of Psych, the desk job for a

ship's captain. And then two months watching the thickly rolling muscles of men playing blitz, and recoil against the interplay of hard nerveless bodies, and every coarse word from an ignorant tongue.

Towers whispered, "Phelps." But he did not know if he were heard, if sound existed or if there were any reality around him. Phelps' eyes slid back and forth around the semi-circle of gaping statues. He took two steps on his new foot and looked down at it. He licked his lips and then turned, searching for something.

"Thought you'd play with me," he muttered, to no-one. "Thought because I was crippled you could—" His head swung back and forth. Finally he found what he wanted. There was a long-necked metal decanter clasped to the wall above the desk; Towers kept it for the rare moments when self-doubt engulfed him, and now Phelps jerked it from its prongs and hefted it. He struck it against his cupped palm and it rang softly.

Towers worked his throat desperately and croaked, "For the love of Might, Phelps!" For the love of God, Montresor, bells jingled in his disordered imaginations.

Phelps smiled once; then he sat down on the floor, and raising the decanter above his head, brought it crashing down on his bare foot.

There was a black fall, as though the laws of the universe were repealed, and inseparably

welded atoms dissolved. The decanter, coming down, had burned an arc of light across Towers' retina, and when he was able to see again, he found Phelps sitting on the floor, calmly smoothing the sock over his stump. There was no foot.

Towers crossed glances with the others, afraid to look down.

"Might as well," said Beal, and he looked. He found his booted foot where it belonged. Then the others dared look, and found themselves whole.

"Hell," said Twelvetrees softly. Then a new thought struck them. This might be illusion too. Dionisi raised his foot and stamped twice, ringingly, like a newly shod stallion breaking sparks in a dark smithy. After that they relaxed.

Towers picked up the decanter. It was undented. Yet when he closed his eyes he could still see the arc of light. "How much of that was illusion?" he wondered.

With savage jerks Phelps tightened the laces of his artificial foot. "Yes, how much?" The tone of his voice made Towers turn. Phelps pointed down. On the floor, on the dull green metal, there were several distinct marks of a bare left foot.

"What now, Captain?" Phelps asked in that dry bitter voice. He had been seen by everyone in an impossible state of degradation; pain and shame fell from his lips like toads and lizards.

But Towers wasn't going through all that again. He sighed, "Out of here while we've still

got our skins. If that isn't an illusion too."

Phelps said steadily, "I don't mind keeping on."

"No, Phelps," said Towers gently, "there's nothing more you have to prove." He turned. "Dionisi, are you all right? We're going back."

So soon?

He whirled. "Who said that?"

But the words had been spoken in their minds.

The Cayley and Sylvester? The Cayley and Sylvester? A metallic voice whanged in their heads like an hallucination of anaesthesia. They stood still. "What do you want?" Towers called aloud, ridiculously loud.

This is the Amhibfa of Kwe-medn. Will you talk with us? If you will find it more comfortable to use the radio our call signal is . . .

"The way it looks," said Towers, "you may get that foot after all, Joe."

They faced each other across the go-board. Although it was 0335 hours by the ship's chronometer, both were too wrought up for sleep. But contact had been made, negotiations arranged, and the overdrive and autopilot were set for Earth.

Phelps shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I mean, not in one way . . . I could have a whole new body every year and I'd still be amputated inside." He added hesitantly, "My family has a long record in the Service. I was expected to go in, and I let them push me without thinking, even

though I barely scraped through the Physicals. When I finally started having doubts, I thought, well I'll go out once more and then call it quits for a while." He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke work its way toward the airsuck. "That one more time was when the Qumedni called it quits for me. And I let the guilt nearly kill me for three years after that. I felt my authority was weak, it was my fault the ship blew up, if I'd had a tighter grip—"

"But from what you've told us about it, I'm sure—"

"No, no, I don't believe that now, but I did for three years, and I didn't like it."

"And you won't go back?"

Phelps looked away. "No. You said yourself, I don't have to prove anything more. And I don't want any presents from the Qumedni."

"I'd like to know what the brass back home think we're going to be able to trade for what we want."

"You'll see, handfuls of beads for the friendly tribes." He grunted. "If you will find it more comfortable to use the radio—'—ruthless pirates, they are calling the tune and they know it! We've surprised them a little, caught at their respect in some way, and they want to know why. We'll have to be careful with them: soon as they find out what makes the wheels go round—" he drew a finger across his throat.

"Yes," Towers agreed. "I'm tired of being a foreign devil, but I think this is going to be interesting." He pulled out his turnip and found that it was 1:26 a.m. at home. His children, in crib and cot, would be dreaming of star-patrols. His wife, he trusted, would be asleep in the middle of the double bed with her hair in pin-curls and two pillows piled under her head, the way he had found her once on an unexpected return.

Rubbing his leg with one hand, Phelps retracted his previous move with the other. Towers sighed and put away his chronometer. *Oh, you'll be back all right, whatever you say now*, he told Phelps silently, watching the thin nervous hand hovering over the board,—*but not on my ship, by Heaven!*

Beal was strangely glum. He undressed in silence.

"What's the matter, Beal?" Dionisi taunted. "Every other trip when we have come back, you say, 'Now we got them buggers in the palm of our hand.' Why not now?"

"If I had 'em—" Beal clenched a fist till the nails bit. "Jeez, if I had them here!" He flung himself into the top bunk and slept.

Twelvetees thought of the dance pavilion on the glittering water, and hummed softly.

"I been to the stars
that shine in the skies,
I never seen any
that shine like your eyes,
Oh, dum-diddly dum . . ."

No ripple stirred the calm littoral of his mind, and he fell asleep at peace even with the Qumedni.

Dionisi in the middle bunk lay awake. Thinking of the face of that woman of his dream. He remembered every feature as though she had been real, and he wanted her. Surely, once seen so clearly, she existed somewhere. He had only to use his eyes and he would find her. Somewhere . . . He slid toward sleep.

Suddenly he jerked awake with a force that cracked his head against Beal's bunk, drawing a cry of anguish from himself and a curse from Beal. In his half-sleep he had remembered the face of the tramp he had picked up, and something about that face, some line of it under the thick and tawdry make-up— Suppose her face had been scrubbed clean, perhaps . . . He swore, because now the two faces were inextricably mingled. Damn the Qumedni! They had played with him, given him a vision and taken it away. So, suppose he went back and sought her out? She would be only what she was and take him for a sucker. She was too far gone. It was a long time ago, and for someone else, that she had been the girl on the hill. Yet he wanted something, and he had a sudden feeling for her, for once a painful sense of the derelict flesh he had used and forgotten. He fell into a troubled sleep.

And the *Cayley & Sylvester* spun the first fine warp thread between Earth and Qumedon.

THE END

*The customer is always right.
Especially when she is a
customer like ...*

THE LADY IN 17A

By ED RITTER

MISS KLUE had never gotten married because she had never found the Right Kind of Man. She wanted someone who would love her deeply, madly, with great passion, but who would not get fresh. Because Miss Klue was pretty well inhibited. She would not have called it that. She would have called it Acting in a Proper and Ladylike Manner. But the kind of people who sit around feeling their pulses and reading books by Freud would have called it inhibited.

So it was something of a surprise when she went out one day and bought Albert.

She had been sitting in her tiny third-floor apartment, looking out the window at the gray hotels and office buildings, and at the boats, small off in the distance, passing to and fro under

the suspension bridge over the Hudson. It was Sunday morning, there were few people in the streets, it was one of those warm spring into summer mornings, and suddenly she felt terribly alone. Suddenly she realized that she had been alone for a long time, perhaps always.

Also that if she didn't do something about it, very likely she always would be. She called up what courage she had, and decided to face the problem realistically, which is not uncommon amongst those who live in dream worlds, for after all if they were already in touch with reality it would not be necessary.

She sat by the window for hours watching through her ancient bifocals the buses and taxis and the swell of church attenders, and thought and thought. After a while she got

up and went into her small kitchen and fixed a cup of tea and an onion and tuna fish sandwich. It was just when she bit into a bone that the great idea came to her, and instantly she knew what she would do. Oh, sitting in front of the window through the rest of the lonely afternoon and on into the misted twilight, she demurred, and tossed it back and forth in her mind, but she knew from the first she would do it, and when she finally lay in her single bed and pulled the sheets up to her chin there was no longer any question. She'd have to lie a little, but she'd do it—first thing in the morning.

The clerk at Courroisier's Robotterie was most attentive. The robot business had been falling off since March. The clerk, a Mr. Handley, was a little past middle-age, about the same as Miss Klue one would have said. You could not tell it from his hair, which was dyed, but he was getting too old for the hard-sell. Worse yet, the sales manager knew it too. He had given Mr. Handley a pep talk that morning, and Mr. Handley was about ready to scream.

When Miss Klue walked in the door he moved quickly around the counters to her, and bowed, genuflected, and probably would have kissed her hand excepting that it would not have been correct, since she had her gloves on. He jumped into his act, leading off with a smile which resembled

remarkably an overripe and seedy cantaloupe cut in half and gushing.

"Good morning, madam," he said. "Lovely morning, is it not." Something in the tweek of his hairbrush mustache suggested that it was truly a beautiful morning, and that Miss Klue was the most beautiful thing in it.

Since no one had ever said this to Miss Klue before, even without saying it, and since she wasn't too sure of her ground anyhow, she became embarrassed, but managed to mumble something about wanting to buy a robot.

"Of course, of course," smiled Mr. Handley, thinking that maybe this one would be a pushover. "I'm sure we have just the thing for you. If you'll just step this way."

He led her past the sales manager's desk, a sort of red plush podium that looked out into every nook and corner of the salesroom. "Interview room, please," he said to the sales manager. He smiled again, exuding confidence.

"Take G," said the sales manager returning a glance compounded of hauteur and contempt. The look in his reddish green eyes was foreboding and said "Handley, you better not muff this one!"

"Thank you. G then madame. Just follow me please."

"If you'll sit on the couch please," he said. "I have some questions to ask you."

"Questions?" Miss Klue was alarmed.

"Strictly routine," said Mr. Handley. "You see, our motto is 'Service to Our Customers.' We want to furnish you only with the best. Of course, if you don't want the best there are other concerns who specialize in cheap merchandise—"

"Well," said Miss Klue, "I certainly don't want cheap merchandise."

"I knew it, I knew it," said Mr. Handley. "When you walked in the door I said to myself, there is a lady of quality, who has come to the right place. Well, then, the questions."

Miss Klue gave her correct name and from that point on fibbed terribly. Her husband was out of town frequently, and there were the children, and she had something in mind on the order of an English butler, one of the old school of course. She lied because she could not bear to say that she, an elderly spinster wanted to buy a man. It was true she wanted a gentlemen's gentleman type, and that was the problem, because even in this day and age nice ladies did not buy men. But she certainly did not want a lady to be her companion—an old one who would be fussy, or a young one who would have her mind on things other than Miss Klue's comfort. These young biddies now-a-days couldn't even brew a proper cup of tea.

Of course, there may have

been other ideas back in Miss Klue's unconscious, but she was unconscious of them.

Mr. Handley knew she lied, not because he was any shrewd judge of human nature (he thought he was), but because practically everyone who came in to Courroisier's to buy a robot told lies. Mr. Handley didn't care. They had money, they wanted to buy, they had their reasons. And the questionnaire was really just a government form, and no one ever seemed to check on it, the F.B.I. being plenty busy with other matters than these.

So he entered a few more falsehoods into the record during the course of which he made occasional small sounds unlikely to offend anyone, such as "hum-m-m," and "why yes, of course," and then it was done, completed, ready to be stamped and filed.

"You would like an English butler then. A bit older than yourself, perhaps forty, yes?"

Miss Klue kind of giggled, and said "Yes, that was correct."

Mr. Handley excused himself and some moments later returned with a fat dossier. "You understand that really first quality robots are quite sensitive people, sensitive robots that is—I don't know why I said that, I suppose it is because Courroisier robots are so perfect it is difficult to tell them from people like ourselves. Well, anyhow, we feel it best to look at photographs first. Then, when you are pretty sure

we will send them to you for a, ah, personal interview."

"Oh," said Miss Klue, obviously disappointed.

"I might add that a Courroisier robot is unique and different, there is no mass production duplication with a Courroisier."

"Well," said Miss Klue.

"Now then, here is a really fine specimen, this is Gregory 852, note the masculine build, the fine—"

Miss Klue blushed. "I'm not at all interested in that," she said. "Don't you have any with clothes on?"

Mr. Handley paled. That had been a mistake. But not too late. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I'm afraid I have the wrong folder." He rushed out for another, almost in panic, realizing the mood and setting had changed abruptly, that he was losing touch and contact, that he might not make the sale after all. As he bent over the file stacks he could feel the sales manager's fishy eyes boring into him. He hurried back to Miss Klue and bowed most respectfully.

"This is Edward 469," he said. As the morning wore on he said, "this is Remus 129, Blakemore 34, John 139, Peter such and such, and so on. Miss Klue did not want to buy. She did ask the price of Bluford 99, a really gorgeous specimen in full cutaway, with genuine simulated gerfaks, but when he told her, she indicated that the price was much more than she had in mind.

When he walked by the podium again, the sales manager hissed, "how are you doing?"

"Very fine, very fine, think I have her sold now," he answered, but they both knew better.

He thought hard, as he leafed through the dossiers. He was almost to the end of the file, as well as of his rope. Then he folded back the picture of Albert 3b, and with a flash of insight such as comes only to desperate men, he saw the answer to both his problem, and Miss Klue's.

Because Albert 3b wore a smile remarkably similar to a seedy watermelon just cut in half, with the juice still drizzling out along the edges. Of course Mr. Handley didn't see Albert in just this way, but he realized that he and the robot bore some resemblance to each other. He knew how his face looked in the mirror. Here in the picture was the same buoyant, sincere, infectious grin, the same manly chin cleft, and the hair curled smartly just so—Mr. Handley saw himself. Of course he'd have to cut off his mustache. But it would be worth it.

He trotted back to Miss Klue. He put his whole small soul into it. The dossier said nice things about Albert, but Mr. Handley made vast improvements on the copy. "Brand new," said Mr. Handley (although Albert was actually thirteen years old, and on his third set of retreads. "Uncorrupted by life," said Mr.

Handley, "you can break him in the way you want him, a perfect servant for you and your family." He added more embellishments and more, until you would have thought he was talking about himself instead of Albert, which he was. "And," he added, "and—"

"And what," said Miss Klue, who by now was scared out and just waiting for a chance to bolt outside and get lost in the busy morning crowd.

"I'm glad you asked that," said Mr. Handley. "This is the most fantastic thing of all. Because you are a new customer, and we value repeat business, you can have Albert at a—steal."

Maybe she'd have to buy to get out of the place, thought Miss Klue, getting a little desperate. "How much?"

"Well, because this is a very special arrangement we will have to handle it somewhat differently than with regular purchases. You simply pay me a small deposit, say fifty dollars." Hopefully.

"Then Albert will visit you, at your home, and if you like him, you can pay him in small weekly payments, and—"

"How much," asked Miss Klue, about to cry.

He told her. It was an insignificant sum, twenty percent of the regular market price. A thousand dollars. Certainly she could afford that.

Miss Klue thought to herself she could afford fifty dollars to

get out of here. She wouldn't have to like Albert when he came for his interview.

"Just make the check out to me," said Mr. Handley.

He put it in his vest pocket, and buttoned his coat. He smiled. "I'm sure you'll like Albert," he said.

After Miss Klue had gone, the sales manager jumped out of his chair, and ran into Mr. Handley going the other way.

"You failed again," said the sales manager. "You're finished."

"I sure am," said Mr. Handley, and walked out the front door, flashing a really dazzling smile.

Out in the street he looked at all the people milling around, and felt happy to be a part of all this. He cashed Miss Klue's check in the first bank he came to, got looped in the bar next door to the bank, left with thirty-five dollars which he used for downpayment on a butler's dress suit. He went home, laughing like a loon, pleased as peach punch, shaved off his mustache, shined his shoes, put them on, took them off, put on his dress suit, flopped in bed and slept it off, dreaming of tomorrow and Miss Klue. From time to time the sales manager's eyes bore into him, and he screamed a little, and then laughed.

After Miss Klue left Courroisier's she stopped in a little tea-room on Fifth Avenue, ate a cherry conche, and wondered

what she had done. She went home and looked out the same window at the same bridge over the Hudson, and slept, and then it was a day later and she had done it and she wondered how she had ever gotten the nerve to do it. She looked at her watch. In just twelve hours and eight minutes Albert would arrive for his interview. She tossed it back and forth in her mind, but there really wasn't very much question.

Tomorrow snuck in. Miss Klue got up four hours early, when the trash cans were still being banged around at the service entrance, when gray mist was seeping out of the yellow eyes of Jersey, just as the monster beast of Manhattan was uncoiling and scratching its talons in the streets. She got up and looked out of her window and felt the wonder and beauty of it all, and felt that the down deep inside pain would disappear and a new and better feeling take its place.

She sat in front of her wavy vanity glass and primped, and hunted through her wardrobe for the very nicest thing to wear, and brewed a cup of tea and waited.

Precisely at 10 o'clock the knock came at the door.

"I'm Albert," the man said. He was dressed impeccably, stiff shirt, bow tie, buttoned shoes, tails, bowler. He was as perfect as though he'd stepped out of Agatha Christie or better yet an old 1950 kinescope.

"At your service, madam," he said.

"Please come in and sit down," Miss Klue said. "May I see your references?"

"Certainly madam." Mr. Handley pulled out the certificate he had stolen from Albert's dossier.

Miss Klue pretended to read it, but out of the corner of her eye she kept watching him. Perfect, perfect, she thought. There was just one small doubt. Not important. But now was the time to find out these things. Not after, when it was too late.

"Mr. Albert—" she said.

"You may call me Albert, madam."

"Ah, yes, Albert. Well, the man who waited on me at Courroisier's—"

"Mr. Handley."

"Yes, the funny man with the mustache—"

"Oh, yes, that would be Mr. Handley—"

"Well, he said that Courroisier's were all originals, that none were duplicates."

"That is the fact, madam."

"It seems to me I've seen you somewhere before."

"Hardly, madam. Perhaps some gentlemen you have known in the past who resemble me. That often happens."

Miss Klue hadn't known any gentlemen in the past. "Of course," she said. "Of course."

"Then I'd like to tell you what I want Albert so we can tell if you'll be happy here."

"I'm certain I would," said

Mr. Handley, looking about the small apartment.

"Well I want to have a clear understanding with you." Miss Klue made it very clear. No this, no that, no the other. Absolutely circumspect. Prompt. After all, etc.

When she was quite finished, and had repeated the stipulations over and over she said, "Now do you have any questions?"

"Where shall I sleep, madam?"

"In the kitchen, of course," said Miss Klue.

Mr. Handley smiled within himself, knowing what he did of human nature in general, and ladies in particular.

But after a few days he wasn't so sure.

It was all very odd.

Miss Klue loved the new arrangement. In the morning when she dinged the bell, Albert brought in her breakfast, and he was a reasonably good cook, and made a wholesome cup of tea. Miss Klue sipped it, or nibbled her toast, keeping the covers pulled up to her chin even after Albert had excused himself and returned to the kitchen.

It was nice being waited on.

Sometimes they took walks together, or she went shopping, and Albert carried the packages home.

She had never been so happy.

It was almost like being married, only better.

Sometimes people stopped and turned to look at her in the street, a lady, followed a few

paces to the rear by a butler in formal attire. So she bought him a business suit. From then on they often had dinner out, and attended the theater, and Albert wore his butler's suit only at home.

Once a week Miss Klue paid him his fifty dollars and gave him the evening off. She wasn't sure if this was required with butlers, so she asked Albert, who said it was customary madam, as he would need occasional maintenance work on his motor anyhow.

Miss Klue wondered what his motor looked like but decided not to ask, since she felt he should keep his place, which he would not do if she permitted intimacies.

So they decided on Thursday nights, when it became Albert's custom to go out a bit on the town. He would deposit most of his money in the night box of the First and Third National, the rest he spent in bars and bistros up and down Sixth Avenue. Often he met maids and serving girls who were having their Thursdays off too, and sometimes they would talk to him, but he felt funny about it. He quickly became accustomed to being a robot all week, and it was difficult to adjust back to being a people again. Sometimes he wasn't really sure.

Talking to the young ladies should have been fun, especially after being cooped with Miss Klue all week, but it didn't seem

to work that way, and some nights he had only a few drinks and went home before his time was up.

The whole situation began to seem very peculiar to Albert.

Somehow he found himself getting rather fond of Miss Klue. More than that, he sensed it was a two way deal, that she in turn had more than an employer's interest in him. He could tell from some of the little things she did. But not by any overt action she made, or word she said.

Because on the surface she remained very prim and formal. Her conduct was exemplary. They might chat all evening, and sit near together having tea on the little sofa. He wanted to reach over and touch her hand, to give her just a tiny pat perhaps, to show some little bond of human love, but she did not give him an opening. Precisely at bedtime, nine-thirty, she would give a polite little yawn, stand and say, "Excuse me Albert, I'm going to bed now. Please make sure the doors are locked. Good night." And off she would go into her sterile bedroom, closing the door and latching it.

This was like adding cedar chips to the tiny flame starting to smolder in Albert's heart. He had never been anything in the way of a lover. Usually the other sex aroused little interest in him. The girls he met on his Thursday nights off hardly

seemed worth the price of a small beer. But Miss Klue was getting to something deep inside him. Perhaps something that went a long way back. Something to do perhaps with his having always been a gentleman, and the fact that she was a lady. They really had much in common, he thought. Her chaste behavior tightened the bond, drawing him closer. Yet there was the problem, that she would not let him get close enough.

Despite all this, she slipped sometimes. Very small things, but he caught them. A button on her blouse that she forgot to button. The night she pulled up her dress and tightened her garter. As soon as she had realized she pulled her dress down sharply, and went on talking about what they had been talking about, as though nothing had happened. And then one night she called him "dear." She wasn't even aware she'd said it, he could see that, which made it even more precious to him.

When she went into her bed that night, he sat up and brewed yet another pot of tea, and sipped it and thought and thought, late into the night. He mused, "I'm on the horns of a dilemma. I'm sure she wants me. Her unconscious actions show it, like her calling me dear. Surely she is not the sort who calls every man dear. But there's the rub. Perhaps she doesn't think of me as a man, so she restrains herself. Yet if I tell her I am a man and not a robot, she will know I

am at least a liar, and then she will have no regard for me. So what to do?"

Sober reflection until dawn failed to provide an answer. Finally he went to his bed under the kitchen table, curled up and slept fitfully.

Daylight brought no answer, and as the days went by the situation became more difficult for him. She was nicer to him, he was more attentive to her, physically they came closer together, but they did not touch.

"Albert," she said one day, "You know having you with me has made my life very pleasant."

"I'm very glad," said Albert.

"You've kept your promises, and I'm very pleased with you."

Albert smiled.

"As you know, I make the last payment tonight. It's been very nice having you, you've brought happiness to an old lady!"

No, you're not an old lady, he wanted to say. He wanted to say I love you, I'm real flesh and blood just like you, you've brought me happiness too— But he didn't know quite what to say, and said instead, "Thank you, Miss Klue, it has been a great pleasure for me also."

"Thank you, Albert," she said. She reached down into her wicker sewing basket and pulled out the money and gave it to him. "Have a pleasant evening," she said.

Albert walked down Lexington Avenue and on towards Central Park, not at all certain whether

it was a pleasant evening or one of the saddest in his life. It was one of those evenings made for love. He couldn't see the stars through the bright city lights, but he knew they were there. Here and there through the busy Manhattan crowds he saw lovers walking arm in arm. He might be a lover, if he had more courage. It wasn't too late for him and Miss Klue, it could be just the beginning. They could do so many things together. They could take the Old Boat ride down the East River, and go to the top of New York Tower. Soon they could go to the opera together, not a lady and her butler, but lovers, man and wife perhaps. They could watch Menotti's old favorite, "The Bells of Carlisle," and hold hands when Emona sings the plaintive aria to Lothario just before he poisons her with the radioactive strontium. He could if—

He would do it. The devil with his night out and the chambermaids from the Bronx. He stopped and turned around, down 57th to Lexington, down Lexington to 49th, back to Miss Klue. On the way he stopped and bought a bottle of the finest Brazilian sauterne. "I will do this right," he said. "Right, right, right."

Up the steps and up the elevator and down the hall to number 17A. He tapped lightly on the door, and let himself in.

Miss Klue was in bed.

He knocked on her door.

"Yes?" she said.

He braced his shoulders, and stood tall, all five-foot-nine of him. He opened the bedroom door and walked in.

Miss Klue, who was reading in bed gave a little shriek and grabbed the covers and pulled them up to her thin neck, at the same time exposing her bony feet, which stuck out at the end of the baby blue blanket.

Albert, Mr. Handley that is, decided this was no time to stand on ceremony. He unwrapped the wine bottle, and advanced right into the fray. "I bought you something," he said, "a present. Here," he pushed it to her with bravado.

Miss Klue, taken aback dropped the covers with one hand and grabbed the bottle of Brazilian sauterne. This exposed a good part of her, covered only with a thin and not too frilly avalon nightgown.

Albert fell to his knees beside her. "Miss Klue, Miss Klue, Miss Klue," he said, "I have something to tell you."

Miss Klue was breathing air in big gulps, overcome, Albert threw his arms around her.

Miss Klue had nothing to fall back on but centuries of Puritan tradition. She rose up and brought the bottle down with a tremendous whack right on top of Albert's balding cranium. There was quite a splat, with golden mellow sauterne running all over, and Albert slumped to the floor, out like a match in a high wind.

"Oh dear," said Miss Klue, "I've broken him!"

She got out of bed and slipped into a dressing gown and paddy slippers.

She bent over and jabbed a tentative finger into his stomach, but nothing stirred.

"Oh dear," she repeated, and added, "what do you do with a broken robot?"

Some of the unknowing fear she had felt the day she bought Albert, when she had almost decided not to, came back.

She could call a repair shop, but what would they think, here in her bedroom, the whole place smelling of alcohol? And what would she do with him if they did fix him. He obviously was a bad actor. After his promises and all. He might even attack someone else. It was too awful to think about. She knew what she had to do.

She would throw him away, and forget the whole thing. But by the time she dragged him as far as the kitchen she knew she could never make it out the rear entrance, and all the way down the back steps.

Maybe she could take him apart. She rolled him over, and pulled off his shirt. She didn't see any knobs or screws to unfasten.

Well then. She rummaged through the kitchen until she found a long sharp knife and a meat cleaver.

Then she sank the knife into his stomach and took a big slice. For a moment his eyes opened

and he was about to scream and then he was very quiet.

It took Miss Klue about two hours to cut him into pieces small enough to carry in her wicker sewing basket.

She marvelled at the amount of fluid in him, and the fact that he was made so much like a human being. Courroisier's certainly put out a quality product.

She thought sadly that he had been a comfort, and that she would be lonely again. Then she wrapped the pieces up in old

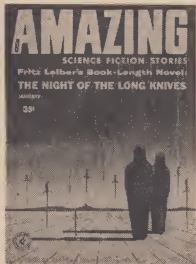
copies of the *Sunday News Herald Tribune*, and mopped up all the juice with tissues and a couple linen napkins.

During the rest of the night she carried the pieces down one at a time in her wicker basket and put them in the garbage can. No one saw her, and she was glad, because she would have been most embarrassed if anyone had seen her in her dressing gown, and had asked her what she was doing.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

A powerful Fritz Leiber novel of a radiation-devastated America headlines the January issue of AMAZING.



In a story that pulls no punches, Leiber tells a taut, grim tale of a man, a woman and a mysterious "civilization" all caught up in the murderously suspicious tensions of a world where death rains daily from the skies.

Among the short stories, **Al Sevcik's** *A Matter of Magnitude* rings a change on relativity theories, and **Floyd Wallace's** *Second Landing* is a gentle tale of Christmas science-fantasy.

Other short stories and all the regular features round out another not-to-be-missed issue:

Tell your newsdealer now to reserve a copy of the January AMAZING for you. On sale December 10th.

KNIGHTS OF THE DARK TOWER

By WILSON KANE

ILLUSTRATED BY VARGA

*Their nude bodies glow-
ed with beauty and with
strength... What, then,
must their souls be like
... and which is the good
... and which the Evil?*

HELENA should not have had to do it. There were a dozen fine men ready to fall at her feet at the crook of her finger. Helena's contours seemed created to drive men, if not mad, at least quite silly.

There was never a breath of suspicion directed toward her. No gossip circulated where she was concerned. Yet, if her descent had been known, there would have been far worse than gossip. Particularly after the disappearance of Hal Vincent . . .

She was tall for a woman, and as even the Bishop had observed, very well constructed indeed. But she showed little interest in exercising her manifold attractions for the purpose God designed. Her features, while extremely regular and with a fresh and utterly wholesome bloom and texture of skin, were shadowed by

an expression of gloomy introspection.

Helena was a woman who grew on you, though. After but a short acquaintance one began using Helena's image as a criterion for all beauty; holding other women up to her in the secret mind, for comparison, and having them fall far short.

Her hair was a deep red, turning fire gold 'in the sun. In the darkened interior of her home her hair became a smouldering flow of glinting fox-fire. Her eyes were solemn witchery above sweetly curved, if too sober lips.

There was a kind of repressed courage, a boldness held in check about her, incongruous with the studious and controlled solemnity of manner. Of all Helena's excellencies in memory, they were apt to be eclipsed by the impression left by a slow-acting but ava-



Under Helena's spell, Hal began to explore the Tower of the Dolphin.

lanche-like power of mind. For Helena was a genius, unaware of her true stature. She was unassuming, yet always subconsciously confident of her ability.

She painted, with a mastery of technique and an ease and facility astounding to a professional. She did not take herself seriously artistically, but her mind found a welcome relaxation in the study of other paintings.

Helena's mother had been a student of the Mysteries. In an earlier day she would have been labeled a witch. Helena's education for the most part consisted of study in a store of weird lore descended from antiquity in the libraries of immediate relatives of her family.

There are family libraries which will be found filled with books on horses, books on mining or the raising of sheep. The pursuits of the sons are often colored by the bent of the parents, through the medium of the inheritance of these volumes.

Helen's ancestors had been guilty of possessing many a forbidden bit of knowledge in the days when such possessions were passport to a stake. Some of them had in fact collected the lore of the dark past, and had handed down a number of uniquely precious tracts. Too, there were several notebooks of quite recent date, and these contained data which proved the most valuable of all, to Helena. She had been left some of her trove by her mother, and the rest she had

quietly appropriated from disinterested relatives.

She had made good use of the forbidden knowledge, and she understood fully just why some things should not be known at all, yet should not be allowed to perish.

The first important cog in the turning wheel of Helena's fate was a certain painting that caught her eye in a shop window on a side street. She recognized it for what it was, with a tremor of dread and a fierce and quite overwhelming desire for its possession.

Yet, she knew that no customer would be able to buy *that* painting! It was in that instant of recognition that she had the decision which led her *beyond* human aid. She made her decision in full knowledge of the power that stood behind the ancient symbol the painting embodied.

She entered the little shop, her eyes solemn and introspective as ever, fixing the little bald man in the apron with a gaze of strange and disconcerting intensity.

"The picture . . ." said Helena, and stopped. She knew if she were right, no more words would be necessary.

"I see that you recognize the picture." The little man's words seemed to pass through his enormous nose.

"I do," answered Helena, and stopped again. This little man was going to do the talking. That was fine.

"If you know that much, you

must know more. Why then do you come here?"

Helena was puzzled. She wanted to know more, but knew that if she betrayed the exact source of her information, she would learn nothing. She opened her purse and took out a little gemmed crystal, the size and shape of an egg. She touched the ancient mechanism inside the egg with the little metal needle that projected through the transparency. The egg began to hum a soft, monotonous song, and on its surface a glitter spun madly, born of the turning mystery within the crystal. The old man's eyes followed the spinning spot of light, and after a second he stood rigidly, his eyes fastened, his body frozen, his will Helena's.

"May I see the painting now, sir?" asked Helena, smiling to have caught even him, who should have known.

His bald head bowed, the huge nose wriggled in a stifled embarrassment. But he went to the window and removed the picture. He placed it in her hand, his eyes furious, his hands reluctant. Helena stood examining the thing, while the strange little shopkeeper stood rigidly waiting.

It was not a work a normal human could ever have executed. Helena recalled vaguely certain facts about this picture from her readings of antiquity. It had been painted apparently by a follower of Hieronymous Bosch, or by an admiring contemporary. Most

students of art would have accepted it readily as some clever modernist's attempt to outdo the first and greatest surrealist.

It was a painting of a little old man with a bald head and a fantastically large nose. It could have been a portrait of the little shopkeeper, except that the figure wore a monk's gown. And for the fact that Helena knew the painting antedated even Bosch's period. The little man could not be *that* old.

The painted figure held in its hand a vial of blue fluid. From the vial poured a thick rosy mist. The little monk occupied but a small lower portion of the canvas, and the rest was taken up by a madman's dream apparently arisen as a result of and within the rosy mist from the vial.

"Why do you refuse to sell this antique?" asked Helena, her eyes narrow and alert upon the old man's sunken sleepy eye-slits.

"It is not my property. It is an ancient symbol, exhibited only to announce to the followers of our organization that a council is to be held."

"Ah, so!" Helena was triumphant. "The ancient order of what?"

"You must know us, or you would not know so much else. I need not answer. I am recovered from your little charm, my girl. It has grown with time, and we do not welcome those who force themselves upon us. Followers are selected by invitation only. That is the rule."

Helena held the gemmed crys-

tal egg under his nose. "One more query, little master. Where?"

The old man told her, and Helena slipped the gemmed egg back into her purse. The little man shook himself with an expression of irritation, and replaced the painting in the window. Helena left the shop, turning and smiling gravely and sweetly into the frowning old face in the window. The face did not smile back at her.

The next day the painting was the subject of an article in the art page of a famous daily newspaper. After buying several papers from different cities, Helena found that the article, itself of no particular interest, had yet been widely reprinted and circulated.

To anyone else, this would have been unnoticeable and quite usual. To Helena it was equivalent to finding a treasure beyond value—something too mysterious for her mind to comprehend, and that was a lure above lures. For Helena meant to learn if a certain ancient tale were true, and it concerned this same peculiar cult.

Hal Vincent was far from possessing the deep and powerful character that was Miss Calhoun's. He was good looking in a mild, clean sort of way. He was tall enough to top Helena's five-ten by a half inch. He was pale and slender, but lithe and strong in spite of the city life he led. He would have been classed as an introvert, though in truth he was not. He was rather one of those

who pursue a dream but never do a great deal about making the dream a reality. For he knew reality has a way of being synonymous with disillusion.

Yet Hal went through life, day after dull day, hoping for some exciting, exotic occurrence to jar away the dull routine and leave him master of a kinder Fate.

As Hal Vincent walked down an ordinary dark street, to him every shadow *might* be it; the great adventure, about to pounce. He was still young enough to feel certain that "it" would pounce, that today was *the day*, this next moment the very instant! Perhaps it was this frame of mind in which unkind Fate saw Hal Vincent and so chose him for Helena's next victim.

Helen wanted the formula of the material in the painted vial in the old monk's painted hand. And Hal became a tool which she could use to get it.

This night found Hal with restless feet, wanting to go out into the darkness and help Life bring forth the long-awaited miracle, help Chance to father an adventure. It was usual for Hal to go out so, and prowl the city streets for an hour or for four—as the mood held. But never had he found anything but the tawdry, the sham, the stupidly artificial, or the ignorant misunderstanding of the average—those who do not believe that *any* shadow might be *it*. Those who see as the only realities the ugly twins Toil and Lust.

On this particular night, Hal

set forth with a mind as innocent of the true source of the drive within him as the moth new-sprung from the cocoon ignorant of the source of the questing urge which drives him winging through the dark. Hal knew the drive was there, knew he had to search. So does the moth unerringly find the female.

Hal was not at all sure for what he was searching, but he was sure he would recognize it instantly when he found it. He was certain, as certain as is the moth, that there must be some vast revealment of the meaning of life waiting to unfold itself before him. But the details were completely misted over with strange layers of past frustrations.

The moon hung at the end of the street like a window in an ebony tower of love; golden light within, darkness and warm mystery without. The air bore the multitudinous fascinating scents of the unknown, the hidden lure of the city for flesh. From distant gardens and parks came the perfume of night flowers, the faint smoky odor of cooling chimneys, the distant sounds of dance orchestras and the far-off chatter of people. The autos honked on the boulevards, the trees drooped black and ominous limbs across the pavements, and every shadow contained some dark waiting thing which might presently reveal itself, but never did.

The night was spicy with the madness of dying summer. Hal's feet wandered on and on. He was

alone but almost happy in the fact that at least *he was seeking*. On and on, following Fate's hidden finger . . .

Then from a close dark window came a low yet very distinct voice, woman's voice, husky and thrilling to Hal, containing a mocking kind of intent to charm. Her words Hal did not understand, but suddenly Hal was certain, this was IT! Then he remembered all the other times women had accosted him, and the resulting disillusion.

Helena said: "Just a moment, could you give me the time?"

Hal instinctively pushed back his sleeve, even as he decided against his will that after all this was just another commercial houri, however fascinating and intelligent her voice might sound. He glanced at the glittering object in the woman's hand, as she went on: "My watch has stopped, and I have an appointment later on . . ."

Hal blinked, took a step closer to Helena's window. He had never seen a watch made of crystal, egg-shaped, with that particular rotating glitter of wheels visible within the case! He looked at her watch more closely, and he was caught! He was helpless to leave her.

As he raised his eyes to hers, now close deep pools of darkness, a shock of complete inebriation ran through his body. Hal felt with vast certitude this was IT!, the great adventure at last. *No other eyes* had ever done just this

to him! He knew no other eyes ever could.

He stood there, paralyzed by the sudden sensation of awful and immediate desire, unable to open his mouth to tell her the time.

Hal was the perfect picture of innocence ensnared, and Helena leaned a little from the open window, giving him one glimpse of her deep-breasted beauty. Then Hal walked up to her door, and Helena rose to open it.

She stood in her doorway, her eyes intent upon his until something of her iron calm and almost grim determination conveyed itself to him. Hal's mind clutched at Helena's through the medium of her eyes and the hypnotic compulsion her ancient gadget had fastened on him stole over his consciousness even more completely.

She was a healthy person, with rosy cheeks and strong, round arms. Her hands seemed so very capable. Her nose was straight and lovely, and on her generous lips was a quirking amusement at herself and at his plight. But she had plans, and this man seemed the type!

Her voice was low and devastating to Hal in effect. "Please relax and don't worry. Come in, and I will explain. I know this may seem monstrous to you, but believe me it is necessary and you will come to no harm."

Hal followed her into the gloomy old mansion, a place inherited by her, once set off with wide grounds, now surrounded

by lesser buildings. He sat down in the antique leather chair she indicated, and wondered just what it all meant. His mind was in her keeping; he was conscious, but the strange device she had used to capture his will he knew as an inescapable trap which had closed upon him.

"I will soon release you, but first I must know certain facts I can learn no other way. Certain types of people have a power I believe I see in you. Please relax completely and do exactly as I tell you."

As Hal relaxed more and more, her voice kept up a steady murmur of reassuring sounds, which seemed to Hal to be sounds conveying hidden and immensely significant meaning, if only he could hear them more clearly. Then he became conscious of a vast relief . . . of a new and heady freedom. A freedom of a bodiless kind, strange, exhilarating. He was floating above his own body like a ghost above a corpse!

Helena's face took on a triumphant, joyous look. Hal saw that she had not been sure this thing would be done on the first attempt.

"Now you have learned an ancient secret," Helena's voice came to him as from a great distance, "and I want you to do exactly as I command. I must know what is hidden in a certain place. I will tell you how to reach the tower of the Dolphin . . ."

Hal drifted out of Helena's home and up the wide street ad-

jacent. He moved unseen, unseeable. As he moved, strength and a far-reaching new set of senses made themselves his own. He saw through the houses as if they were made of glass, through the many minds as if they were the minds of children or of puppets, and he passed on across the city like an angel of destiny seeking an appointed one.

The Tower of the Dolphin he recognized instantly as he passed above it, because of the peculiar ancient garden and wall, and the round tower above the great, squat old house. It was just as Helena had described it.

It was a walled garden, and Hal sailed over the wall and settled on the grass like so much drifting mist. The wall of the old garden was set with fountains, in individual niches, one for each of the four walls. Each fountain was the nude terra cotta figure of a young girl, bearing a vase from which water carefully trickled down over her graceful body.

About the garden were a series of small pools, set round with stone dolphins, ridden by small naiads at play. The whole area was shaded by the very old and twisted cedar trees. Here and there bloomed flowering crab, azalea, narcissus, fleur-de-lis and moss rose. Peacocks strutted, Hal was sure, here in the daylight. The peris must be about such a garden frequently, for it was so secluded, and you could not see over the wall to the teeming city. It seemed a spot protected by

some ancient dryad's magic for her own use.

Hal moved across the grass and up to the big door, of brown weather-stained wood, with great locks and hinges of bronze across the planks like bars. But Hal's peculiar misty self moved through the solid wood and into the old mansion of the Dolphin Tower.

He hung there, inside, a much confused ghost of himself, for nothing in here was what a man might naturally expect.

Graceful alien curves of draped portieres over worm-eaten woodwork, hanging candelabra of an earlier century, gemmed curios from the tombs of Egypt and Babylon, and certain other bric-a-brac from some period Hal could not recognize, but knew that it filled him with awe and dread because so utterly beyond the ordinary, so obviously things of an importance recognizable only to a mind above known culture, beyond wisdom. It was a room as bizarre and as frighteningly unusual as a medieval magician's. This house seemed to have been shut off from the vulgar modern growth of the city about it for a century. There was nothing familiar, except perhaps the gleaming bald head of the little old man who looked up at Hal's entrance and nodded to him just as if he could see him.

Hal saw no way to answer the little man's greeting, and after a long minute the bald head turned away, seemed to forget that he

had noticed Hal's misty entrance through the locked door.

Hal followed the owner as he moved through the lower floor of the mansion and ascended a winding stairway, up through a series of chambers each round. Hal knew the person of the little man was hurrying, as if in flight to some sanctuary where a ghost like himself could do him no harm.

At the top of the stair was the last chamber; here the windows were evenly spaced, each commanding a view of the city far below, outstretched and jeweled with the glittering lights of night revelry.

But the old fellow paid no attention to the view, busied himself about some chemical apparatus. A gigantic glass still and coil, a flame beneath the huge boiling chamber. Several large glass containers, Hal saw, were used to collect the distillation. It was a place with a litter of complex equipment, some new, some very old. If Hal had known what powers and what weapons the old creature was possessed of in that complex array of strange gadgets, he would have been far away.

Quite suddenly the little old man seized a small cannon-like contrivance by the handles, whirled it about on a swivel, and fired it point-blank at Hal's supposedly invisible self. From the mouth of the cannon a liquid material sprayed in a fine shower, stinging Hal's supposedly immaterial being like buck shot.

In a space of a few seconds,

Hal found his new self imprisoned within a solidifying shell of plastic material, his limbs, his power of movement vanished, his ghostly mouth stopped up with a sticky, sickening sweetness. He was caught like a fly on honey!

Helena, conscience - stricken when Hal failed to return to his body, became more and more distraught as the hours passed. Hal Vincent's lifeless body sat regarding her stonily and accusingly. What she had brought down upon herself with her curiosity and acquisitiveness she could not know, but certainly if she did not get the man back to life again there would be trouble enough.

At last she resolved that where so much was already risked, she might as well brave the worst. Though she knew the opponent was a mightier force than any she herself could command, there was a chance that if she went there in person, something might be done for poor Hal.

She parked her car in the shadows of the cedars where they thrust ancient limbs over the dark wall of the garden beneath the Tower of the Dolphin. Climbing atop the car, she reached the top of the wall, straddled it, then climbed down via one of the niched fountains.

Stealing across the soft lawn, past the frozen music of the stone naiads on their leaping dolphins, past the huge boles of the cedars, past the strangely carved

stones of the garden steps, over the beds of flowering azaleas and rhododendrons, she crouched at last beneath the darkened windows.

Prying open one of the ancient windows made some noise, and she lay there in the shadow several minutes, listening to her own breathing and the rustle and scrape of someone inside moving about. At last the interior sound died away. She slid over the low sill into the darkness of the first floor.

Helena peered intently at each of the weird mementos of the unknown past that made up the peculiar contents of the frightening chamber, and the warnings given her by her observations of the wisdom and powers of the dweller in the Tower nearly made her abandon her plan to rescue the imprisoned astral body of Hal.

But at last she stole up the winding stair of the mysterious center of the web of ancient power in which she had enmeshed herself by her own foolhardiness. As she put her foot into the round chamber at the tower's top, a blinding light came suddenly into her face, and a tremulous aged voice cried out at her in cracked triumphant vaunting.

"Caught ye too, stupid one! Think ye to overcome the priest-knights by mere amateur burglary? By sending of astrals to spy upon us? 'Tis sad indeed ye're mothers did not bequeath ye brains beneath the empty

skulls of ye two. Now speak out and tell me what ye desire, before your doom seals your mouth forever!"

Helena, who had dared all to possess what she knew was worth any risk, heard the ancient's cracked voice with a sinking of her heart that she could not control. The feeling of helplessness was new to her, and she strove to pull her wits together. She knew she was at the mercy of the creature who she could not even see for the blinding light in her eyes. But she managed a retort, hoping to put off final disaster until she saw a way out.

"And our skulls would not be so empty, old one, if your own elixirs had been brought to us properly, instead of hoarded up secretly and selfishly among you who should have long been in your graves. Why don't you just give me the formula of the vital fluid, and let me do the right thing by the human race? You have kept your secret long enough, and to what end? It should be apparent to you the course is wrong!"

There was only silence from the old creature of the tower, and nothing is more frightening than silence when one expects at any moment some unnatural and unexpected punishment for transgression. Then, at last, as she took a tentative step forward, she heard the old creature again.

"Do not move forward, ye witch, or I'll not be responsible. Do ye hold yourself still there,

and I'll decide what's best to do with you."

Now Helena became guilty of her gravest error in her estimation of the nature of these opponents she sought to despoil. She felt that the old one's words must necessarily be false. That he feared if she came forward, she would be out of the blinding light and would find her obstacles disappear. Obstacles always had disappeared before her in the past.

Helena moved forward in a swift, sudden glide, her long legs and perfect muscles giving the movement an instantaneous quality. She was conscious only of her own sudden shriek of despair as she fell through a round opening in the floor, felt the chill of liquid about her, then the swift fiery pain of corrosion eating at her flesh.

The titular head of the ancient Holy Order of the Knights of the Grail sadly allowed the fluid to run out of the vat beneath the floor. He watched as the darker particles of the fluid collected upon the infinitely fine mesh of metal screen through which the liquid filtered. This screen he washed in another chemical liquid, placed carefully in a vial which he stoppered and set upon a table.

The next day a painting of a little man with a huge nose and a vial in his hand hung in the window of a shop on a side street in the city. A man who saw it went to a phone booth and made a dozen calls.

That night a score of withered

and ancient individuals gathered in the garden of the mansion of the Tower of the Dolphin. One by one they filed into the great meeting chamber of the lower floor.

Upon the dais sat the master of the tower laboratory. Beside the table, upon which was the vial of dark fluid, was a tank of sparkling liquid and a strangely glistening, pure white canvas. The canvas, although it was blank, was framed with a magnificent square of carved teakwood.

The Master stood, held up his hand, intoned the ancient ritual in all its dread glory of potent syllables, invoking the powers that may never be named. Then he said:

"We are gathered to witness the just punishment of two who would have deprived us of our dearest possession. Please remain silent while the portrait is prepared!"

Lowering his hands, the Master took the blank canvas and immersed it in the liquid, so that it lay evenly covered with the sparkling fluid. Then he attached the wires that lay upon the floor of the dais to the connections on the side of the tank. Last, he poured into the tank the vial of dark fluid collected from the vanished body of Helena Calhoun and from the astral body of Hal Vincent.

The fluid undulated idly in the tank, and a strange activity shimmered through it from the electrical charge pulsing between

the walls. Then slowly it settled upon the white canvas, staining it with red streaks and splotches of color. As the old man watched, always fascinated by this wonderful phenomena of ionic adherence to innate pattern, a strange thing happened upon that mysterious canvas.

After long minutes the Master removed the picture from the tank, placed it upright and dripping upon its support, where all could see. A murmur of admiration ran through the gathering.

The formerly blank canvas was now a painting of a very handsome nude woman, whose hair was smouldering fox-fire red! Her eyes were solemn witchery above sweetly curved lips. Kneeling before her, holding her hand to his lips, was a young man, also nude. The only incongruous note in the painting was the somber air of introspection, the brooding ambition shadowing the perfect, regular features of the tall, beautifully modeled figure of the woman.

Such was the end of the mortal dross of Helena Calhoun and Hal Vincent.

The audience broke into applause, a murmur of appreciation punctuated by exclamations and questions.

"Their evil genies so beautiful, what then of the real character?"

"Where are the transverts, let us meet them!"

"If that is the dross, then the gold is certainly of rare quality. You have done well, Master!"

The old man on the dais smiled and bowed, over and over, his face full of pride in their approval. Then he held up his hands for silence again.

"Those of you who do not know the action of our ancient elixir upon the human body are few, but for your sake I will explain. A human immersed in the fluid is relieved of all infected cells by a flux of repellant ions, and these cells dissolve into the fluid itself, leaving the body of the subject relieved of the evil nature, cleaned and made new and much more able. I wish to show you two, accidentally forcing me into subjecting them to this treatment prematurely, who have decided to become members of our ancient order. I give you Miss Helena Calhoun and Halbert Vincent!"

From the shadows at the back of the dais two figures, swathed in the white robes of the novitiate, walked forward. Only their faces, beautiful as angels, calm and clear and noble of mien, could be seen. The woman held up one graceful arm.

"I have been guilty of gross misjudgment of your order. I stand corrected. I hope that I will be able to reward your kindness to me with service of value. You have my undying loyalty and admiration."

Halbert Vincent, beside her, only bowed his head in agreement.

The ancient society of the Knights of the Holy Grail stood as one to greet their new disciples. . . .

THE END



There once was a king in Babylon who saw the handwriting on the wall. He didn't understand the translation. Which wasn't surprising, because there is more than meets the eye in . . .

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

ILLUSTRATED BY SUMMERS

A THOUGHT struck me. I swerved off the road heard a truck roar by screaming with its angry horn, and held on to the steering wheel until I stopped shaking.

I have been struck by thoughts before.

But the others were my own.

I realized almost immediately that it had not been really a thought. It had been a printed sentence that appeared suddenly before my eyes. I had been driv-

ing all day and by this time I was hypnotized into a numb world of endless strips of highway and the hoarse mutterings of motors. The road moved on and on, the countryside looming up dimly at the sides, forever running back from me, like a motion picture.

Then suddenly there was the still, as when the camera breaks down and you feel deceived and cheated.

And the sentence.

I began to laugh at myself.

Once I woke up from a nightmare sweating and scared so stiff I couldn't bring myself to reach out from the blanket to turn on the light. Then I recalled the nightmare. I'd dreamed my cat was trying to hang herself with my best necktie.

So I laughed, recalling the alien thought that stopped the road in its tracks.

YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD, the sentence had said.

The night traffic went by me. Salesmen going home. A low thunder, the flick of a scream, the long disappearing sound of cars going by in the night. The idiot sounds of sane civilization all around me.

I started up the car again. I felt as though I'd dropped into some odd pocket of the universe. I looked into the brilliant, mindless eyes of a speeding car, waited my turn, and nosed back into the mainstream.

Long day. Too much driving. Not enough sales. Dearth of a salesman. I laughed nervously. I'd have to have either my eyes or my head examined.

Eyes, I concluded. It would be much cheaper.

"g,w,f,y," I said. "I think I can even see the little ones on the bottom line. "a," I squinted hard, "m . . ."

"Never mind," the doctor said, blinding me with a flashlight. "Look to your left. All the way. Now to the right. Hmm."

I kept wishing he'd regard my

eyes as more like windows of the soul and less like a television set.

He made me look at those deceptive little pictures with the colors.

"Odd," he said. "Doesn't mean anything."

He pulled one lid up and had a good look inside.

"What did you say your symptoms were?"

I hadn't told him and I wasn't about to. "Er . . . things seem to get out of . . . er . . . focus sometimes. I'll be looking down at something like the . . . er . . . floor and suddenly . . . *there it is!*"

"Caught it!" he said triumphantly. "Fine! Fine aberration," as though he had invented it himself.

"Did you see it, too?" I was intent on looking around the floor now, because I had seen it very plainly.

"Yes, indeed. A rare type of spasmodic strabismus, I should say."

I sighed but it was more a shudder. I was cold inside. Maybe he saw a spasmodic strabismus. I saw a sign that said, YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD.

"Nothing I can do for you," the doctor said jovially, "short of operating. I don't think it's serious enough to warrant a corrective operation. Nothing to worry about. Just ignore it and check back with me in six months."

Nothing to worry about. That was easy to say.

Maybe I ought to see a psychiatrist. But the thing was

so *real*. Were visions that real to other crazy people?

Other crazy people!

I dropped into a telephone booth and began to flip through the yellow pages of a telephone book. How do you find a psychiatrist? They just list them all as physicians.

Do you call a doctor and ask him to give you a good, cheap psychiatrist?

I couldn't afford a psychiatrist. Fifteen or twenty dollars an hour or whatever it is. I had eighty dollar a month payments on the car and I was about to sink a heavy down payment on a hi-fi set. No two ways about it.

I dropped the telephone book and stooped absently to pick it up.

YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD, the cover flashed at me.

I got out fast.

Eventually, of course, I ended up in a headshrinker's office. A man can take only so much. I got so I was afraid to drive.

The psychiatrist, to my surprise, sported neither a goatee nor an accent. Nor did he have a couch, unless the armchair was a folding couch. I stood staring at him and the antique, polished table he apparently used for a desk.

"Have a seat," he offered, but I was too tensed up to sit down. Hell, I was embarrassed. How was I going to tell him about my delusion without having him think I was crazy?

Finally I said, "You're going to think I'm crazy, doctor."

That was a bad beginning. He just looked at me.

"Well, this thing keeps . . . well, here I was on the road one night, driving along, when suddenly I see this . . . Great Gods of Olympus, doctor, how old is that desk?"

Even his bespectacled calm was disturbed, but that was the least of my concerns. For his desk had flashed a message at me. And the message was, WITH LUCK AND PLUCK YOU WILL RISE TO GREATNESS.

The doctor cleared his throat and arranged his thoughts "Around 1880, I should say. Er . . . any special reason for asking?"

"You've just cured me, doctor!" I shouted, and scooted out of the office throwing a large bill at the receptionist.

Actually, of course, I didn't have any problems solved, but this was my first break. This was the first message I got that *didn't* say, YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD.

I don't know, really, why one delusion made me feel insane and two delusions restored my sanity. Except that I was never convinced that the first was a delusion. And there is a logic deep in the human mind that makes a probable reality out of two possible realities.

My lack of scientific training stood me in good stead.

I felt as though I had something to work on. It was an antique desk. That must be significant. Of what? I had glim-

merings of an idea, but I didn't know where it would lead.

My next stop was an antique shop. But after I stared at an expressionless foot stool for an hour the proprietor came up and folded his arms at me.

"You counting the stitches in the *petits points*?" he asked threateningly.

I did my best to look like an insulted millionaire and left.

So I went to the museum. There, at least, I could stare. Even if I looked suspicious I could always say I was an art student.

I didn't know what to pick. Something below my eye level, since that's where my messages had been appearing. That left out paintings and hangings.

I decided to start back at the beginning. In the quiet chill of the deserted museum, in the midst of the Egyptian collection, the incongruity of the whole thing struck me again. The messages were so silly. YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD. WITH LUCK AND PLUCK YOU WILL RISE TO GREATNESS. The one thing that had not occurred to me was that the messages might be supernatural. That was because they were silly. The supernatural might be many things. But not silly.

Still, there is an aura of old, old magic about Egyptian things. I looked at the strange, square-carved bodies and enigmatic faces of Egyptian art. I settled on an ancient sarcophagus, so full of time it should have fallen

to dust centuries ago. I watched, almost hoping it would yield no message.

It did. The message was in hieroglyphics. Much too fast for me to copy the curious little pictures.

I shifted to the Greek collection, because I know a few Greek letters and I might be able to keep the letters in mind long enough to write them down.

That night I called the boss and told him I wouldn't be able to go out on the road for a week. It's a slack season, anyway, so he said all I had to lose was my commission.

The Greek collection yielded a message the next day. Twice. I couldn't read it, of course, but I got it down.

The Classics professor at the University was delighted for the opportunity.

"The only thing people ever bring me to read any more is Roman numerals. When the journals start using arabic numbers I'll be obsolete."

"Nice for the Arabs, though," I remarked, not knowing quite what to say.

But I didn't feel as flippant as I sounded. Standing there in the cramped office, full of the dusty, chalky smell of learning, I was filled with excitement and, deep inside, shot through with cold needles. Now that there was a third message, I expected it to explain everything.

The professor read the message and frowned. "Shaky looking sigmas," he said, "but I can

make it out. Where did you get this, anyway?"

"Er . . . my girl friend wrote it to me," I said. "In a letter. You know."

"Not the girl for you," he said. "The sentence reads: I RULE BECAUSE I AM STRONG."

The room seemed to fold in on me, a little, dark room staring at me with the one bright eye of the window. I sat down. I must have been pale.

"Perhaps it's a joke," the professor offered, seeing something was wrong.

"Is it a quotation?" I asked, grasping at straws in an unknown sea.

"Not exactly," the professor said. "But it's fifth century Greek and you'll find something very like it in Thucydides, book III and book V. The philosophy was a pitfall that Athens fell into. She abandoned democracy for rule by force. Athens murdered the entire male population of the island of Melos and they said, 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.' Not very pretty."

Not pretty. Mass murder. Why was I getting the message? Was it a *message* or was that just my first reaction that I hadn't thought to abandon? What was it all about?"

In any case, it didn't seem likely that it was a personal message for me.

I went back to the museum. The next thing I got a message out of was a Louis XV bed. It was in French, so I copied it

down dutifully and brought it to the French Embassy.

I got thrown out.

I brought it to the University.

I got thrown out.

I got out a book on eighteenth century French mores and a French lexicon. I burned the message carefully. It's a wonder it didn't burn up by itself.

Contrite, I began concentrating on a Puritan Hornbook. Sure enough. YOUR SOUL IS DOOMED TO HELL.

Gloomily I wandered over to an early cotton gin. MOVE TO THE CITY, the message said.

That was odd.

Move to the city. That's what everybody would be doing soon after the invention of the cotton gin. The Industrial Revolution.

A command?

Why?

There was some pattern, some meaning. But my mind kept backing away from every pattern I made. I needed to forget it and come back to it later.

I left the museum in the early evening and dropped into a movie. It was an inconsequential western. I don't even remember what it was about. I *do* remember coming out of the movie with an overwhelming urge to eat an ice cream cone. I figured seeing a cowboy movie had triggered a childhood desire.

To my surprise, I found an ice cream stand set up in the lobby of the theatre. People were flocking around it, although it

was a chilly night and the popcorn looked warm and comfortable. I waited until they were all gone.

"You know," I told the girl, "it's a funny thing, you having this ice cream stand here, I was dying for an ice cream cone and I come out and here's an ice cream stand."

The girl popped her gum and turned worn blue eyes on me. "It ain't my ice cream stand, it ain't my idea and it ain't funny. You been took, mister."

"What do you mean?" If she were an alien from another planet about to explain my messages, I wouldn't have been surprised. "What do you know about it."

"Subliminel," she said darkly. "Something like that. They flash these pictures of ice cream during the movie. So fast you don't know how you seen them. Then you want to buy the ice cream. You don't know why, you just want to. Me, I don't like it."

I didn't know whether she didn't like the ice cream or the subliminal suggestion. But she'd given me an idea. A darn good idea.

Subliminal suggestion.

I was back to my eye doctor bright and early the next day.

"How many people," I asked him, "have this spastic strabismus, or whatever I have?"

"Some chromatic aberration," he said reprovingly, "and a rare kind of intermittent spastic strabismus. Very few people have it." He shook his head as

though it were, indeed, a sad situation. "We get to see it so seldom."

It almost made me feel inadequate.

But I understood now why I was seeing things other people weren't seeing. If I wasn't having delusions.

I wondered what would happen if I put an ad in the paper asking people with my kind of eye trouble to get in touch with me.

Suppose I got an answer. And suppose the other guy *didn't* see messages. How would I ask him without giving myself away? And suppose he did? Would he know any more than me? More than likely anybody with my experience would be in the booby hatch. If I hadn't caught that message on the psychiatrist's antique desk I would be, too. Maybe that's where I'd end up anyway.

I went by the library and got out a stack of books. Then I came home and made myself a big pot of coffee. There was an inviting-looking bottle of bourbon on the shelf, but I shook off the temptation. I could at least *try* to solve my problem.

The thing to do was pretend it was someone else's problem. Something I read in a book. Not something that made me turn cold all over. Because an unnatural occurrence, no matter how silly it is, is the most frightening thing in the world. If the ghost of Hamlet's father had wiggled its ears, Hamlet would not have laughed. And when time stops in

its tracks to say, YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD, it's not funny.

Before I attacked the books I thought out the basic thing that scared me. The analogy to a movie. Was the world a three-di movie? The actors, the setting, all without substance? Then what was I?

Cogito, ergo sum, I thought. I'm glad someone pointed that out.

Or am I part of someone else's thoughts? A dream. What would happen if they woke up? Whose dream was it? Mine or theirs? Like the riddle of the Red King in *Alice in Wonderland*. A futile line of thought. That could be true of life aside from the messages.

I didn't want to get off brooding about life in general. Take it as real.

The messages, then. Were they real or a delusion? There was something I was now armed to decide. Could I have imagined the Greek? The French? No, I couldn't read either. I didn't know either period of history.

And the Greek message *was* a meaningful phrase. I pulled out the copy of Thucydides I had gotten from the library and checked on the references the professor had given me. It checked out.

Pride. Rule by force. Finally, unnecessary cruelty. I flipped through several books on Greek history. It was that philosophy that led to the downfall of Athens. It motivated the war that ended the golden age of

Athens. It ruined her alliances. Finally, it lost the war for her.

That message, then, had a meaning. If not a purpose.

The others.

The Louis XV bed. Was that message a reflection of the times or a cause of the mores it implied? It had a result. Louis XV said, "Après moi, le deluge." And there sure was. Heads rolled the next generation.

MOVE TO THE CITY. A direct command.

That one set me thinking. The growth of the factory. The move to the city. Inventions or no inventions, would the Industrial Revolution have come about merely because the means for it were there? Why were the means for it not there just as well in the seventeenth century? The sixteenth? Or even earlier.

Why were the Greeks, who displayed such outstanding ability in all other ways, so technologically backward? Could they envision no other way of life?

Or was it because they were not motivated that way?

They had fire and metal and craft to work it.

They had brains and world enough and time.

They even had legends of robots. There were the automatic handmaidens of silver and gold wrought by Hephaestus to serve the gods on Olympus. There was the brazen man Talus who guarded the island of Crete for King Minos.

And yet all their work was done by hand.

Then take the Chinese. All the centuries they had gunpowder they used it for toys. And yet they fought wars. Did no one think of using gunpowder for weapons?

It's not the circumstances of life that matter, I decided. It's the motivation.

Where does motivation come from?

When I asked myself this question I had to get up and pour myself a drink. For the question suddenly slid into the question I had really been after when I sought to find what the messages meant. What I really wanted to know was where they came from.

My reaction was instinctive. I looked upward.

"I know you're there," I shouted. "Now I know you're there. Who are you?"

There was only the silence of my familiar, frowzy sitting room. The worn furniture, tired with years of living with me, seemed to look at me curiously. What answer did I expect?

It occurred to me, briefly, to wonder if I were being blasphemous. Then I dismissed the thought as illogical. The creator has no need for such crude methods of communication.

My eyes dropped to the floor. YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD. Sure that motivated us now. It had become the entire basis of our economy. Let people start doubting it and what would result? Not a local depression. A free-world depression. The pivot would break and

life would come tumbling around our shoulders. Then there would be too many angry men. What matter which side would start the war? If men are angry enough, they can destroy the world. The means are too easy now.

However, a depression wasn't likely. Nobody needs to be told, YOUR CREDIT IS GOOD. We just assume it. We live on it.

We live, I concluded, on some one else's motivation. Have been.

Why? Are we animals in someone's zoo? A giant child's toy? A sociological experiment of some other race?

O. K. So I knew we were being motivated by subliminal suggestion. Free will was a laugh. How would I tell the world?

Make a speech? Write letters to the paper? Write my congressman?

I could make quite a splash in California, I knew. But that wasn't the sort of thing I had in mind.

It's the classic situation. If I did the wrong thing once I'd be considered a crackpot forever.

I thought of getting in touch with Dr. Rhine at Duke. But then my problem was not one in para-psychology. It was a physical reality. It should be explainable in molecular terms—the messages were *there*, on matter, calculated to appear just below the level of conscious sight. They must make at least some faint disturbance in the matter on which they were printed. Some discoverable disturbance.

And their effect was a psychological fact. Who would be interested? Psychologists.

How would I find those least likely to laugh at me?

I thought of calling one of the big Foundations and finding out who had been given grants to work on psychological problems. But that was too big. My problem was specialized. And I didn't know which Foundation would have it.

Finally I called the public library and said I wanted to find out who could help me with a problem in subliminal motivation. They dug out their lists of research teams. There were plenty of them. I had my choice.

The one I finally settled on was a semi-military psychological research program studying cultural motivation. It was a good choice.

It was a small, tense man who interviewed me. He held a cold pipe and kept glancing at it as though it were going to make some remark. Dr. Thane was his name. When I'd finished my story he lighted the pipe and smoked for a moment. Not purposely leaving me hanging in the air and waiting to see his reaction. Pondering what he would say to me in turn. Then he put the pipe down. He did not have the annoying habit of clattering his pipe between his teeth as he spoke.

"You have remarkable insight," he said, meaning it. "Most people don't trust their own senses any more. We just

assume they're distorted. One of the bad side-effects of scientific training. We tend to forget that all information starts with the senses in the first place. And science has nothing so subtle to offer as the human eye."

"In other words," I said, amazed that it had turned out to be so easy, "you believe my story."

He smiled, splitting the bleached face that went with his small, tense frame. "Nothing so naive. It's not a matter of evaluating your sincerity. It happens I've got a team working on these messages. But let me say here and now I didn't know they were messages. You've furnished the most valuable information we've had so far."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but it sounds to me like you're making paradoxes. If you didn't know there were messages, how could you be looking for them? I don't understand."

He lighted the pipe again, blowing smoke into the pleasant litter of books and papers on his desk. A man not given to the pigeon-holing and precision that keeps you on the mere edges of ideas. I liked him. The shared smoke that drifted around the office made me feel less strange and presumptuous.

"You started out with the messages and ended up with the theory. Because you had the native good sense to trust yourself."

"We went at it from the other end. We started out with the

theory and ended up one step short of the message."

"What theory?"

"Our project was a study in motivation. We're attached to psychological warfare. What we wanted to know was what had motivated the great cultural changes of history. Our ultimate interest, of course, was to be able to motivate cultural changes for the better, instead of for the worse, as sometimes happens in history. Particularly, we would like to be able to motivate the enemy by psychological infiltration in case of war. Hell, not in case of war. Right now. Before a war makes everything too late.

"I'm not a psychologist. I'm a historian. But I don't make a move without a psychologist at my elbow. I don't pretend that a knowledge of what people have done in the past gives you a knowledge of why they did it.

"So we looked for motivation and came to the same conclusion as you did when you thought the problem through. All I can add to what you've told me is that you've got experts backing you up."

"Then you found *no* real motivation from within the . . . do you call it culture?"

"We have to call it something. Yes. No motivation. Now don't get me wrong. A lot of people would quarrel with this. A lot of experts. But as far as we're concerned, we're satisfied that the great cultural changes of history have been motivated from outside in some way.

"Subliminal motivation was only one of the possibilities we explored. Several people on the project were particularly interested in subliminal motivation because it is a new thing and we're just beginning to crack the surface of its possibilities. I hoped my mixed metaphors don't get on your nerves."

"I don't know them from the straight kind."

"I've spent too much time among scholars. You get self-conscious about things like that. I cut out cigarettes and took up a pipe because my colleagues kept saying, 'As a cigarette should.'

"Well, we settled on a characteristic of our culture to study. A recent change. The switch from a saving to a debt economy.

"Do you have any idea what would happen if people suddenly stopped spending more than they have and started saving?"

"I've thought about it," I said. "Our economy would break down. A depression would hit. Then war. The end of things."

"You're more right than you know. I am personally acquainted with a man who could press a button and end the world. Not immediately, of course. But he could make a good beginning."

The dead pipe had gone stale and unpleasant. Dr. Thane stoked it up again and blew fresh smoke around.

"We began to investigate, as I say, the phenomenon of a credit society. We picked certain typi-

cal suburbs where expenditures far outrun income. We found people blithely running into more debt than they could pay off in a hundred years. Most people actually didn't know how much money they owed. All they knew was how much the payments were every month. Were they worried? Not on your life. They felt that what they were doing was right. The proper way to live. They would feel guilty doing anything else.

"We had depth psychologists to find all this out. Don't ask me how they work. That's their job and they know how to do it.

"Then they tried to find out *why*. Why do these people, raised in a crippling depression, trained from childhood to believe that a penny saved is a penny earned, suddenly spend money they don't have and feel virtuous about it?

"Do you know what answer they got out of it?"

"What?"

"None. There are certain rules of human behavior. Latitudinous rules, I grant you, but rules beyond which we have to classify a person as insane. Either all these people were so untrue to their own personalities as to be insane, or someone was wabbling with their minds. Someone or something.

"Some outside force was motivating them. How?"

"We all know about the power of advertising. We also know that advertising does not create anything in the mind. It can only pull out what's already there.

People can turn advertising on or off at will.

"Something was at work which could not be turned on and off at will. It was with this realization that we really began to look for subliminal motivation, a picture in a color or an angle just below conscious perception. Rather like camouflage, where you consciously accept the deceit but something you are not conscious of in your mind may not.

"We've got scientists working on chromato-sensitive instruments. It's not just a matter of detecting color. It's a matter of detecting a certain kind of color and perhaps alien matter in almost infinitesimal quantities. Only enough to be barely invisible, if you see what I mean. And perhaps set at an angle oblique to normal vision."

"So they couldn't find it."

"Oh, yes, they found it. Minute variations in wave patterns. On the side of a house. But we couldn't *see* it, even with the instruments we had. We're still working on it.

"But I don't need to tell you now how glad to see you we are."

"You don't need to tell me," I said. "You've told me all I need to know about how you investigate the subliminal motivation. But there's something else that's even more important.

"I don't sleep nights any more."

He sighed and held on to his pipe as though it was the last sure thing in the universe. "I

know," he said. "It's so monstrous we hardly ever talk about it here. Where do the messages come from?"

"Where?"

"I don't know. But I do think this. Given time and money, we may find out. First we investigate the messages. Find out what they mean. Find out what sort of material or force they're made of. Then we can experiment. Rub them out, when we know how. See what happens. Write some ourselves. Write a question and see if it's answered. All we need is time and money. And there's no reason why we shouldn't have plenty of both.

"Maybe whoever or whatever put the messages there is dead or gone now. Then all we have to do is erase the messages and see what the human race can do with a few centuries of real free will."

"And suppose whoever or whatever is not gone?"

"How can I answer that?" Dr. Thane answered almost irritably. "I can't make your mind comfortable. My own mind isn't comfortable. We just have to face it and fight it our own way. We can't even run. There's no place to run to. And you might as well understand right now that you're top secret, high priority security and all the other mumbo jumbo."

"Because of what you told me?"

"Because of what you already knew. We're keeping you here. In the project building."

"Look," I said. "I don't mind

helping. I'll do everything humanly possible to help you. Die, if necessary. But I don't want to be stuck in a prison. I've got my own life, too."

"You want to keep it, don't you?"

I stood up. The room was stale and a little chilly. "Is that a threat?"

"Oh, sit down," Dr. Thane said. "Do you think I carry a space gun? You need to stay here for your own protection. Didn't it occur to you that who or what is behind the messages might have some interest in not having its little game interfered with? That you might furnish some clue we might otherwise *never* find? Here we have guards."

I was sitting down. Hot on the outside and getting colder within, down to a little point of ice somewhere deep inside. "I have a feeling guards wouldn't do much good."

"Maybe not. Maybe this is all cloak and dagger for nothing. Still, I think you'd better stay."

"I will," I said stiffly.

"Tomorrow we'll dig in," Dr. Thane said. "Get to sleep early and prepare to be busier than you've ever been in your life. We'll be at it every minute."

I don't know how you prepare to be busy. I had a reasonably comfortable little room, with a single bed and a wash stand against one wall. The walls were that "soothing" shade of green that you come to associate with

the impersonal desolation of public places.

I'm used to sleeping in strange places. But I'm not used to having guards pacing discreetly outside my door. It made me feel silly.

I opened the door. "You boys like a drink?" I called, for I had found the wherewithall in a cabinet under the washstand.

"No, thank you, sir," the tall one said.

"Not allowed to," the short one said. "Try us after six o'clock in the morning."

"I'm afraid that would try me," I confessed.

I got in bed and tried to sleep. Finally I got up and opened the door again.

"If you're hungry," I offered, "you can go get a sandwich or something and say I sent you for one."

"Thanks, anyway," the tall one said.

"I can't eat when I'm on a top security job like this," the short one said. "Nervous."

"It's worth our necks to take our eyes off your door," the tall one said.

"Well, I guess you're used to it," I said, wondering if I'd ever get used to it.

I closed the door and dug my head into the pillow to dull the soft, regular tread of their feet on the rubber tile. The late traffic noises of the night came dimly and sporadically through the walls. I finally gave myself up to the dark comfort of my blankets and a vast silence.

A vast silence!

I sat up and switched on the light. I don't know how much time had passed. The room was cold as a vault and the forgotten alienness of a strange room in the night came back to me from some distant memory.

"Guard!" I called, hearing my word fall blank on the wall. There was no sound of their feet on the tile.

I leapt out of bed and swung the door open, half afraid it would be locked.

There were no guards. Just beyond the door, on the dark tiles, was the ultimate message.

"Dr. Thane!" I called, running down the hall, to his office.

A light penciled under the door. He opened it, rumped and looking almost childlike in a pair of over-sized white pajamas.

"Dr. Thane, I . . ." I wasn't sure I could tell him.

"You've gotten a new message," he guessed.

I nodded. "I don't know that there's any use telling you. Now there won't be time."

"Tell me anyhow."

I told him.

He was silent for a moment, calculating the movements of the future.

"No," he said, "Not time. And soon, perhaps, not even world enough."

The message grins up at me from every street corner.

SAVE FOR THE FUTURE.

THE END

A GREAT NIGHT IN THE HEAVENS

By
PAUL W. FAIRMAN

*Don't you know when you're well
off? Lilla did . . .*

WHEN John Nard told the girls that this year the family would drive to Observatory Plateau for the annual Clearing they gave forth with a joint shriek of delight and danced around the dinner table. Lilla especially, because she had never seen a Clearing. Lilla was nine, four years older than Tanny, who danced also but didn't really understand what a Clearing meant. Lilla had learned in school and the thought of seeing one put her into raptures.

Father had always wanted to take them but every year something had come up—one of the children ill, the harvest shaping up so that it had to be taken in before it spoiled, Mother busy with the conditioning and storing for winter; always something, but this year the crops were a little late and Father said

they could make it—go with the group from the Area and call it a holiday.

There were only four accessible places on the whole planet from which the great annual Clearing could be seen. The one closest to the Central Area in which the family lived was a day's drive away. That made two days and a night for the whole trip—not too much of a hardship, really, for the pleasure of seeing a Clearing. This was Mother's view of the matter and so she was delighted too.

Lilla and Tanny were sternly enjoined to go right to sleep that night because the trip would start early the next morning and they'd get little rest until after the return. And they tried, but it was awfully hard.

Lilla was especially grateful to God in her prayers before bed

— grateful that things had worked out so that she could see one of His great wonders, perhaps His greatest, and promised to be a very good girl in exchange for the privilege. She fell asleep quickly then.

Both girls were wide awake far earlier than usual the next morning, filled to the brim with tingling happiness as dawn crept down out of the eternal gray of the sky; the gray that made their lives here possible, Father had told them gravely; guarding them from the withering heat of a sun that would have fried them but for the clouds. They'd asked what a sun was and Father had explained; a fire in the sky; a star, whatever that was, made of burning gases around which planets always circled.

But none of that mattered now, as the cavalcade got on its way; seven families all off on the same wonderful holiday. And as Father let in the controls and the ejected air spurts lifted the jetmobile off the ground, Lilla thanked God again that they were actually on their way. It was wonderful, skimming along a foot above the level prairie with the breeze whipping your hair.

And there was Jan Harter to amuse the girls. Lilla was glad when his mother asked if Jan could ride with them because the seven Harter children were too much for their old jetcar. Jan was fourteen, and knew almost everything but you could

never be sure if he was joking or serious. But he was always fun.

For instance, while they were skimming along, he said, "Do you know that on Earth all people had to travel on were narrow cement strips they called roads?"

Earth was the planet everybody had come from hundreds of years ago—or at least where all the ancestors had come from to live on Cerka, the planet that was now home.

"But why did they have to have cement strips?" Lilla asked.

"To travel on. Their cars didn't have jets, only round wheels that rolled along the cement."

Tanny, who was very smart for her age thought this was funny. She laughed. "Then they could only go one place—where the roads went."

"And back again," Jan said wisely and Tanny almost fell out of the car from laughing.

But then, along toward evening, the plateau came in sight and in no time at all the cars were skimming up its slope.

There were many other people on the plateau. Everybody in the Area, it seemed, had come to the Clearing this year.

Rumor got around of course—as it always did—that perhaps the Clearing would not take place this year. This frightened Lilla and she went to Father to ask. He tousled her hair and said it would take place on schedule; that it was an astronomical certainty, a phenomenon

of the planet and could be predicted as accurately as an eclipse.

Lilla made a mental note to ask sometime what an eclipse was but now there was too much fun and excitement, with dusk turning into night and everyone waiting in groups for the great events—the Clearing.

Then it came—magically. There the heavy gray darkness was, up above, standing over and around everything as it always did. But as Lilla waited, quivering all over, the Clearing began. Although you couldn't see them for the darkness, you knew the clouds were rolling away because the darkness itself changed—became blacker, more velvety, more alive. Then, the annual miracle that brought a concerted gasp of wonder from the people.

A living sky! A heaven filled with a glowing brilliance that tightened Lilla's throat until she could hardly breathe from the sheer ecstasy of seeing it. Millions and millions of twinkling lights, some golden, some red, some blue, a dome of sheer magnificence. A revealing of what the heavens were truly like out there beyond the protecting cloud banks of Cerka.

For two solid hours, Lilla

stood spellbound, unaware of time or the people around her; quivering from the beauty of the mighty spectacle.

And then, on sure cosmic schedule, it vanished as it had appeared, the cloud banks forming again; to protect Cerka as always from the searing heat of its too-close sun, and allow life to exist on the planet's surface.

On the way home again, Jan Harter was his normal self; talking as usual, but not funny this time. He said, "On earth the clouds only come once in a while. Everybody there can see the stars every night of the year."

Lilla had been saying a little prayer of gratitude to God and Jan's words caught her attention. *Every day of the year?*

A small twinge of jealousy caught at her but she drove it away. What Jan said was impossible, of course. He was just talking.

A Clearing every night of the year? Stars to look up at during all the dark hours? Impossible. It would be too wonderful. Seeing them but once a year was a gift beyond words; a sure sign of God's love and as she thanked Him in her prayer, her gratitude welled up into tears.

Tears of thankfulness for the lucky little girl she was.

THE END

COMPLETE
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

STAR SURGEON

By ALAN E. NOURSE

ILLUSTRATED BY FINLAY

CHAPTER 1

THE shuttle plane from the Port of Philadelphia to Hospital Seattle had already left when Dal Timgar arrived at the loading platform, even though he had taken pains to be early for the boarding.

"You'll just have to wait for the next one," the dispatcher told him unsympathetically. "There's nothing else you can do."

"But I *can't* wait," Dal said. "I have to be in Hospital Seattle by morning."

The dispatcher shrugged. "The seats were full, so it left," he said "Graduation time, you



The doctors were
plague-stricken



desperate. If the inoculations didn't save the Bruckians, nothing would.

know. Too bad. The next shuttle goes in three hours."

"But I had a reservation on this one," Dal insisted.

"You?" The clerk stared. "Only graduates can get reservations this time of year. Let me see that reservation."

Dal Timgar fumbled in his pants pocket for the yellow reservation slip. Suddenly he felt extremely awkward. The Earth-cut trousers had never really fit him very well; his legs were too long and spindly, and his hips too narrow to hold the pants up properly. The tailor in the Philadelphia shop had tried three times to make a jacket fit across Dal's narrow shoulders, and finally gave up in despair. Now, as he handed the reservation slip across the counter, Dal saw the clerk staring at the fine gray fur that coated the back of his hand and arm. "Here it is," he said angrily. "See for yourself."

The clerk looked at the slip. "It's a valid reservation, all right. But there won't be another shuttle to Hospital Seattle for three hours," he said, "unless you have a priority card, of course."

It was a ridiculous suggestion, and the clerk knew it. Only Physicians in the Black Service and a few Four Star Surgeons had the power to commandeer public aircraft whenever they wished. "Can I get on the next shuttle?"

"You can try," the clerk said, "but you'd better be ready when they start loading."

Dal turned and started across the main concourse of the great airport. He felt a stir of motion at his side, and looked down at the small pink fuzz ball sitting in the crook of his arm. "Looks like we're out of luck, pal," he said gloomily. "If we don't get on the next plane, we'll miss the hearing altogether. Not that it's going to do us much good to be there anyway."

The little pink fuzz ball on his arm opened a pair of black shoe-button eyes and blinked up at him, and Dal absently stroked the tiny creature with a finger. The fuzz ball quivered happily and clung closer to Dal's side as he started up the long ramp to the loading platform. Automatic doors swung open as he reached the top, and Dal shivered in the damp night air. He could feel the gray fur that coated his back and neck rising to protect him from the coldness and dampness that his body was never intended by nature to endure.

Below him the bright lights of the Port of Philadelphia spread out in panorama, and he thought with a sudden pang of the great spaceport in his native city, so very different from this one and so unthinkably far away. The field below was teeming with activity, alive with men and vehicles. Moments before, one of Earth's great Hospital Ships had landed, returning from a cruise deep into the heart of the Galaxy, bringing in the gravely ill from a dozen star systems for care in one of Earth's hospitals.

Dal watched as the long line of stretchers poured from ship's hold with white-clad orderlies in nervous attendance. Some of the stretchers were encased in special atmosphere tanks; a siren wailed across the field as an emergency truck raced up with fresh gas bottles for a chlorine-breather from the Betelgeuse System, and a derrick crew spent fifteen minutes lifting down the special liquid ammonia tank housing a native of Aldebaran's massive sixteenth planet.

All about the field were physicians supervising the process of disembarkation, resplendent in the colors of their Medical Services. At the foot of the landing crane a Three Star Internist in the green cape of the Medical Service was talking with the welcoming dignitaries of Hospital Earth. Half a dozen doctors in the Blue Service of Diagnosis were checking new lab supplies, and three young Star Surgeons swung by just below Dal with their bright scarlet capes fluttering in the breeze. Dal watched them go by, and felt the sick, bitter feeling in the pit of his stomach that he had felt so often in recent months.

He had dreamed, once, of wearing the scarlet cape of the Red Service too, with the silver insignia of the Surgeon on his collar. That had been a long time ago, over eight Earth years ago, but now the last vestige of hope was almost gone. He thought of the long years of intensive training he had just completed in the

Medical School of Hospital Philadelphia in order to become a Physician of Hospital Earth, and a wave of bitterness swept through his mind.

A dream, he thought hopelessly, a foolish idea and nothing more. They never intended to let me finish. It just amused them to watch me beat my head on a stone wall for these eight years . . .

But that wasn't quite true, and he knew it. He had known it was a gamble; Black Doctor Arnquist had warned him from the first. "I can promise you nothing," the old man had said, "except a slender chance. There are those who will fight to the end to keep you from succeeding, and when it's all over, you may not win. But if you want to take that risk, at least you have a chance."

Dal had accepted the risk with his eyes wide open. He had done the best he could do, and now he was certain he had lost. The final, irrevocable word that he had been expelled from the Medical Service of Hospital Earth would be waiting for him when he arrived at Hospital Seattle the following morning.

The loading ramp was beginning to fill up now with Dal's classmates from the Medical School. One or two nodded coolly and turned away; the others just ignored him. Dal turned away to stare down again at the busy activity on the field below.

"Why so gloomy, friend?" a voice said at his elbow. "You

look as though the ship left without you."

Dal looked up at the tall, dark-haired young man towering at his side, and smiled ruefully. "Hello, Tiger! As a matter of fact, it *did* leave. I'm waiting for the next one."

"Where to?" Frank Martin frowned down at Dal. Known as "Tiger" to everyone but the professors, the young man's nickname fit him well. He was big, even for an Earthman, with massive shoulders and a stubborn jaw. Like the other recent graduates on the platform, he was wearing the colored cuff and collar of the Probationary Physician, in the bright Kelley green of the Medical Service. He reached out a huge hand and gently rubbed the pink fuzz-ball sitting on Dal's arm. "What's the trouble, Dal? Even Fuzzy looks worried. Where's your cuff and collar?"

"I didn't get any cuff and collar," Dal said.

"Unassigned?" Tiger stared at him. "Or are you just taking a leave first?"

Dal shook his head. "A permanent leave, I guess," he said bitterly. "There's not going to be any Assignment for me. I'm washed out."

"Oh, now look here . . ."

"I mean it. I've been booted, and that's all there is to it."

"But you've been in the top tenth in the class right through!" Tiger protested. "You know you passed your Finals. What is this, anyway?"

Dal reached into his jacket and handed Tiger a blue paper envelope. "They sent me this instead of my cuff and collar."

Tiger opened the envelope. "From Doctor Tanner," he grunted. "The Black Plague himself. 'You are hereby directed to appear before the Medical Training Council in Hospital Seattle at 10:00 A.M., Friday, June 24, 2375, in order that your application for Assignment to a General Practice Patrol Ship may be reviewed. Insignia will not be worn. Signed, Hugo Tanner, Physician, Black Service of Pathology.' " Tiger blinked at the notice and handed it back to Dal. "I don't get it," he said finally. "You applied, you're as qualified as any of us—"

"Except in one way," Dal said. "They don't want me, Tiger. They never have wanted me. They only let me go through school because Black Doctor Arnquist made an issue of it, and they didn't dare to veto him. But they never intended to let me finish."

For a moment the two stared down at the busy landing procedures below. A loud-speaker blared, announcing an incoming craft. Dal Timgar lifted Fuzzy gently from his arm into a side jacket pocket and shouldered his day pack. "I guess this is my flight, Tiger. I'd better get into line."

Tiger Martin gripped Dal's slender four-fingered hand tightly. "Look," he said intensely,

"this is some sort of mistake that the Training Council will straighten out. If they were washing you out, why would they hold a review? Somebody must be fighting for you."

"But Black Doctor Tanner is on the Council," Dal said.

"He's not the only one on the Council. It's going to work out. You'll see."

"I hope so," Dal said without conviction. "But where are *you* going to be? What ship?"

Tiger hesitated. "Not assigned yet. I'm taking a leave. But you'll be hearing from me."

The loading call blared from the loudspeaker. The tall Earthman seemed about to say more, but Dal turned headed toward the shuttle plane. Ten minutes later, he was aloft as the tiny ship speared up through the night sky and turned its needle nose toward the west.

He tried to sleep, but he couldn't. The trip from the Port of Philadelphia to Hospital Seattle was almost two hours long, but Dal could not even doze. It was a perfect clear night; Dal stared down at the patchwork of lights that flickered up at him from the ground below . . .

Passing below him were the great cities, the Hospitals, the research and training centers, the residential zones and supply centers of Hospital Earth, medical center to the powerful Galactic Confederation, physician in charge of the health of a thou-

sand intelligent races on a thousand planets of a thousand distant star systems. Here was the hub Galactic medicine, from which the medical care of the Confederation arose. From the huge hospitals, research centers, and medical schools here, the Physicians of Hospital Earth went out to all corners of the Galaxy, serving in the permanent outpost clinics, in the gigantic Hospital Ships that served great sectors of the Galaxy, and in the General Practice Patrol Ships that roved from star system to star system answering calls whenever they were needed.

To Dal Timgar this was an alien planet, different in a thousand ways from the world where he was born and grew to manhood. For a moment now he thought of his native home, the second planet of a hot yellow star which Earthmen called "Garv." Only days away with the star-drive motors that his people had developed thousands of years before, Garv II was a warm planet, teeming with activity, the trading center of the Galaxy and the governmental headquarters of the powerful Galactic Confederation of Worlds. Dal could remember the days before he had come to Hospital Earth, and the many times he had longed desperately to be home again.

He drew his fuzzy pink friend out of his pocket and rested him on his shoulder, felt the tiny silent creature rub happily against his neck. There was no one to

blame for his trouble here, Dal knew. His people were not physicians. Their instincts and interests lay in trading and politics, not in the life sciences.

But as long as Dal could remember, he had wanted to be a doctor. From the first time he had seen a General Practice Patrol Ship land on his home planet to fight the plague that was killing his people by the thousands, he had known that this was what he wanted more than anything else: to be a Physician of Hospital Earth, to join the ranks of the doctors who were serving the Galaxy.

But he was a Garvian, alien to Earth's climate and Earth's people. The physical differences between Earthmen and Garvians were small, but just enough to set him apart and make him easily identifiable as an alien. He had one too few digits on his hands; his body was small and spindly, weighing a bare ninety pounds, and the coating of fine gray fur that covered all but his face and palms annoyingly grew longer and thicker as soon as he came to the comparatively cold climate of Hospital Earth to live. The bone structure of his face gave his cheeks and nose a flattened appearance, and his pale gray eyes seemed abnormally large and wistful.

But the gulf that lay between him and the men of Earth went beyond mere physical differences. His classmates had avoided him carefully. Clearly they resented

his presence in their lecture rooms and laboratories, and felt that he did not belong there, studying medicine. From the first they had let him know that he was unwelcome, an intruder in their midst, the first member of an alien race ever to try to earn the insignia of a Physician of Hospital Earth. He had been allowed to try only because a powerful Physician in the Black Service of Pathology had befriended him. If it had not been for the friendship and support of another Earthman in the class, Tiger Martin, the eight years of study would have been unbearably lonely.

But now he knew he had failed. The Council Meeting would only be a gesture; the decision, he was certain, was already made. It was just a matter of going through the formal motions.

Dal felt the motors change in pitch, and the needle-nosed shuttle plane began to dip once more toward the horizon. Ahead he could see the sprawling lights of Hospital Seattle, stretching from the Cascade Mountains to the sea, north to Alaska and south towards California.

He slipped Fuzzy back into his pocket, shouldered his pack, and waited for the ship to come down for its landing. On the ground he went through the customary baggage check. He saw the clerk frown at his ill-fitting clothes and his not-quite-human face. He didn't hear the loud-speaker blaring until the an-

nouncer had stumbled over his name half a dozen times.

"Doctor Dal Timgar, please report to the information booth."

He hurried back to Central Information. "You were paging me. What is it?"

"Telephone message, sir," the announcer said, his voice surprisingly respectful. "A top priority call."

He had handed Dal the yellow telephone message sheet, and Dal studied the words with a puzzled frown:

STOP AT MY QUARTERS ON
ARRIVAL REGARDLESS OF
HOUR; URGENT THAT I SEE
YOU, REPEAT URGENT.

The message was signed THORVOLD ARNQUIST, BLACK SERVICE and carried the priority seal of the Four-Star Pathologist. Dal read it again, shifted his pack, and started for the subway ramp.

Black Doctor Arnquist, the man who had first defended his right to study medicine on Hospital Earth, now wanted to see him before the Council meeting took place.

For the first time in days, Dal Timgar felt a new flicker of hope.

CHAPTER 2

HE FOUND a map of the city at the subway entrance. It was already midnight, and Dal shrank from wakening a physician of the Black Service at 2

o'clock in the morning, but Black Doctor Arnquist had said "regardless of hour." Dal traced the route on the map.

Like other Hospital Cities on Earth, Hospital Seattle was primarily a center for patient care and treatment. Here there were special facilities for the care of the intelligent marine races that required hospitalization. The depths of Puget Sound served as a vast aquatic ward system for creatures which normally lived in salt-water oceans on their native planets. The dry-land sectors of the hospital supported the aquatic wards; the surgeries, the laboratories, the pharmacies and living quarters all were arranged on the periphery of the salt-water basin, and rapid-transit tubes carried medical workers, orderlies, nurses and physicians to all parts of the Hospital City.

The Pathology Sector lay to the north of the city, and Black Doctor Arnquist was the Chief Pathologist of Hospital Seattle. It was the first time Dal had ever visited a Black Doctor in his quarters, and the idea made him a little nervous. No other medical service on Hospital Earth had the power of the Black Service of Pathology. Traditionally in Earth medicine, the autopsy rooms had always been the "Temples of Truth" where the final, inarguable answers in medicine were ultimately found, and for centuries pathologists had been the inspectors and judges of the profession of medicine.

And when Earth had become Hospital Earth, with status as a probationary member of the Galactic Confederation of Worlds, it was natural that pathologists had become the governors and policy-makers, regimenting every aspect of the medical services provided by Earth Physicians.

Of course, the Medical Training Council was made up of physicians from all the services . . . the Green Service of Medicine, the Blue Service of Diagnosis, the Red Service of Surgery, and the Auxiliary Services . . . but the Black Doctors who sat on the Council would have the final say, the final veto power. Now Dal wondered why Black Doctor Arnquist wanted to see him. Most likely, he thought, to try to soften the blow, to help him face the decision that seemed inevitable.

He was still pondering the summons as he pressed his thumb against the identification plate outside the Black Doctor's personal quarters.

Black Doctor Thorvold Arnquist looked older now than when Dal had last seen him. His silvery-gray hair was thinning, and his body seemed more wispy and frail than ever. His black cloak and cowl rustled as he led Dal back into a book-lined study. "I knew you would get my message when you arrived," he said as he took Dal's pack. A good trip, I trust? And your friend here? He enjoys shuttle travel?" He smiled and stroked Fuzzy with a

gnarled finger. "I suppose you wonder why I wanted to see you."

Dal Timgar nodded slowly. "About the interview tomorrow?"

"Ah, yes. The interview." The Black Doctor made a sour face and shook his head. "A bad business for you, that interview. How do you feel about it?"

Dal spread his hands helplessly. "I . . . I suppose that it's something that's necessary," he said finally. The Black Doctor looked up sharply at Dal, his pale blue eyes very alert in his aged face. "Necessary?"

"Yes, sir."

"You mean you really feel it's just normal procedure that your application is being challenged?"

"No, sir."

"How do you feel about it, Dal? Angry? Maybe even bitter?"

Dal squirmed. "Yes, sir. I did as good work as anyone else in my class. I did my part as well as anyone could, I didn't let up once all the way through. Wouldn't you feel bitter?"

The Black Doctor nodded slowly. "Yes, I imagine I would," he said. "As a matter of fact, I do feel a little bitter about it. I can't blame you for your feelings." He took a deep breath. "I wish I could promise you that everything would be all right tomorrow, but I'm afraid I can't. The Council has a right to review your qualifications, and it could refuse you an assignment. I can argue your case, but I will

not be the only Black Doctor sitting on the Council tomorrow."

"I know that," Dal said.

Doctor Arnuist looked up at Dal for a long moment. "Why do you want to be a doctor in the first place, Dal? This isn't the calling of your people. You must be the one Garvian out of millions with the patience and peculiar mental make-up necessary to master the scientific disciplines involved in studying medicine. Either you are different from the rest of your people . . . which I doubt . . . or else you are driven to try for medicine for very compelling reasons. What are they? Why do you want medicine?"

It was the hardest question of all. "I can't say," Dal said slowly. "I *know*, but I can't express it. Whenever I try, it just sounds silly."

"Maybe your reasons don't make reasonable sense," the old man said gently.

"But they do! At least to me, they do," Dal said. "I've always wanted to be a doctor. There's nothing else I want to do. To work at home, among my people . . ."

"There was a plague on Garv II, wasn't there?" Doctor Arnuist said. The virus that caused it was finally isolated and destroyed . . ."

"By the Physicians of Hospital Earth," Dal said.

"It's odd, in a way," the Black Doctor said. Our knowledge of the life sciences here on Earth has always grown hand in hand with the physical sciences. You

might think that the same thing would happen on *any* planet where a race has developed intelligence and scientific methods of study. Of course, it doesn't, which is the reason for the existence of Hospital Earth and her Physicians today, but it still amazes us that of all races in the Galaxy, we Earthmen are the only ones who have developed a broad knowledge of the processes of life and illness and death."

The old man looked up at his visitor, and Dal felt his pale blue eyes searching his face. "How badly do you want to be a doctor, Dal? Badly enough to do anything to achieve your goal?"

Dal hesitated, and stroked Fuzzy's head gently. "Well . . . almost anything."

The Black Doctor nodded. "And that, of course, is the reason I had to see you before this interview, my friend. I know you've played the game straight so far. Now I beg of you not to do the thing that you are thinking of doing."

For a moment Dal just stared at the little old man in black, and felt the fur on his arms and back rise up. A wave of panic flooded his mind. *He knows!* he thought frantically. *He must be able to read minds!* But he thrust the idea away. There was no way that the Black Doctor could know. No race of creatures in the Galaxy had *that* power . . .

And yet there was no doubt

that Black Doctor Arnquist knew what Dal had been thinking, just as surely as if he had said it aloud.

Dal shook his head helplessly. "I . . . I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do," Doctor Arnquist said. "The thing that you were planning to do at the interview would be disastrous, even if it won you an Assignment. It would be dishonest and unworthy."

Then he does know! Dal thought. But how? I couldn't have told him, or given him any hint. He felt Fuzzy give a frightened shiver on his arm, and then words were tumbling out of his mouth. "I don't know what you're talking about, there wasn't anything I was thinking of . . ."

"Please." Black Doctor Arnquist held up his hand. "Remember that we have been studying and observing your people very carefully over the past two hundred years, Dal. It is no accident that you have such a warm attachment to your little pink friend here, and it is no accident that wherever a Garvian is found, his Fuzzy is with him, isn't that so? And it is no accident that your people are in fact the most powerful single race of creatures in the whole Galactic Confederation."

The old man smiled. "This peculiar talent of your people is difficult to describe: not really telepathy, but an ability to create

the emotional responses in others that will be most favorable to you. Just what part your Fuzzies play in this ability I am not sure, but I'm quite certain that without them you would not have it."

He smiled at Dal's stricken face. "A forbidden topic, eh? And yet perfectly true. You know right now that if you chose to you could paralyze me with fright, couldn't you? Or if I were hostile to your wishes, you could make me change my mind and agree to anything you wanted . . ."

"No," Dal broke in. "Please, you don't understand! I've never done it, not once since I came to Hospital Earth."

"I know that. I've been watching you."

"And I wouldn't think of doing it."

"Not even at the Council interview?"

"Never!"

"Then let me have Fuzzy now. Go to the interview without him."

Dal drew back, trembling, trying to fight down panic. He brought his hand around to the soft fur of the little pink fuzz ball. "I . . . cant do that," he said weakly.

"Not even if it meant your Assignment to a Patrol Ship?"

Dal hesitated. "Not even then. But I won't do what you're saying, I promise you."

For a moment Black Doctor Arnquist stared at him. Then he smiled. "Will you give me your word?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Then I wish you good luck. I will do what I can at the interview."

CHAPTER 3

THE interview was held in the main Council Chambers of Hospital Seattle, and Dal could feel the tension the moment he stepped into the room.

Each of the major medical services was represented this morning. Presiding was a Physician of the White Service, a Four-Star radiologist. There were two Physicians each representing the Red Service of Surgery, the Green Service of Medicine, the Blue Service of Diagnosis, and finally, the Black Service of Pathology. Black Doctor Thorvold Arnquist sat to Dal's left; he smiled faintly as the young Garvian stepped forward. To Dal's right sat another Black Doctor who was not smiling . . . the Chief Coordinator of Medical Education on Hospital Earth, Doctor Hugo Tanner. Doctor Tanner blinked owlishly at Dal over his heavy horn-rimmed glasses. He leaned over to speak to the Blue Doctor on his right, and they nodded and laughed unpleasantly.

Dal stood before the table, as straight as his five-foot height would allow him. He had placed Fuzzy almost defiantly on his shoulder, and from time to time he could feel the little creature quiver as though trying to hide from sight under his collar.

At first the questions were entirely medical. "We are meeting to consider this student's application for assignment to a General Practice Patrol Ship, as a Probationary Physician in the Red Service of Hospital Earth. I believe you are all acquainted with his educational qualifications?"

There was an impatient murmur around the table. The White Doctor looked up at Dal. "Your name, please?"

"Dal Timgar, sir."

"Your *full* name," Black Doctor Tanner growled.

Dal took a deep breath and started on his full Garvian name, with the complex family structure and ancestry which entered into it.

"All right, all right!" Dr. Tanner broke in. "We will accept the abbreviated name you have used on Hospital Earth. Let it be clear that the applicant is a native of the second planet of the Garv system."

A Green Doctor cleared his throat. "Doctor Timgar, what do you consider to be the basic principle that underlies the work and services of Physicians of Hospital Earth?"

It was an old freshman exam question. "The principle that environments and life forms in the Universe may be dissimilar, but that biochemical reactions are universal throughout creation," Dal said slowly, "so that the principles of chemistry, physiology, pathology and the other life sciences, once understood,

can be applied to any living creature in the Universe. The basic life processes in one life form are the same, under different conditions, as the life processes in any other life form, just as hydrogen and oxygen will combine to form water anywhere in the Universe where the proper physical conditions prevail."

They went on to more difficult questions. Some were exceedingly difficult. Once or twice Dal was forced to admit that he did not know an answer. Other questions were familiar, and his answers were full and succinct.

Finally the White Doctor shuffled his papers impatiently. "If there are no further medical questions, we can move on to another aspect of this student's application. Doctor Tanner?"

The Black Doctor rose ponderously to his feet. "I have no quarrel with this Dal Timgar's educational qualifications for assignment to a General Practice Patrol Ship. He has been trained in a medical school on Hospital Earth, and apparently has passed his final qualifying examinations for the Surgical Service."

Black Doctor Arnquist's voice came across the room. "Then why are we having this review, Hugo? Dal Timgar's classmates all received their Assignments automatically."

"Because there are other things to consider here," Hugo Tanner said. "Gentlemen, consider our position. We have thousands of Probationary Physi-

cians abroad in the Galaxy at the present time, gaining experience and judgment while fulfilling our Medical Service Contracts in every corner of the Confederation. But Hospital Earth is also on probation. We are seeking a permanent place in this great Galactic Confederation of worlds. Permanent membership in the Confederation is contingent on two qualifications. First, we must have a star-drive of our own . . . a qualification of intelligence, if you will. This we have. But the second qualification for Confederation membership is nothing more or less than a question of usefulness."

The presiding White Doctor looked up, frowning, "Usefulness?"

"Exactly. The Galactic Confederation, with all the wealth of civilization it has to offer, is based on a division of labor. Every member must contribute some special talent. For Earthmen, our talent is our understanding of the life sciences. We had already solved the major problems of disease and longevity among our own people, while some of the most advanced races in the Confederation were still being reduced to helplessness by cyclic plagues which slaughtered their populations."

One of the Red Doctors interrupted. "I'm afraid I don't quite see the connection. Nobody is arguing about our skill as Doctors . . ."

"Of course not," Black Doctor Tanner said. "The point is

that in all the Galaxy, Earthmen are by their very nature the *best* doctors, outstripping the most advanced physicians on any other planet. And this is our bargaining point. If we ever hope to become full members of the Confederation, we must demonstrate our usefulness, our unique skill, as Physicians. We have worked hard 'to build our reputation. Every year new planets are writing full Medical Service Contracts with us, as Earthmen serving the Galaxy . . .

"As *Physicians* serving the Galaxy," Black Doctor Arnquist's voice shot across the room.

"As far as the Confederation is concerned, the two were synonymous," Hugo Tanner roared. "*Until now*. But now we have an alien among us, a non-Earthman who has trained in our medical schools, completed the required work, and now proposes to go out on a Patrol Ship as a Physician of the Red Service. But think of what you are doing if you permit him to go! You will be proving to every planet in the Confederation that they don't really need Earthmen after all, that any race from any planet might produce Physicians just as capable as Earthmen. If we permit this Garvian to become a qualified Physician, it will be the beginning of the end for Hospital Earth. We will be selling out our sole bargaining position."

Slowly the Black Doctor sat

down, motioning to an orderly at the rear of the room. The orderly brought a glass of water and a small capsule, and Black Doctor Tanner gulped it down. The other Doctors were talking heatedly among themselves as Black Doctor Arnquist rose to his feet. "Then you are claiming that our highest calling is to keep medicine in the hands of Earthmen alone?" he asked softly.

Doctor Tanner flushed. "Our highest calling *is* to provide good medical care *for* our patients," he said.

"And yet you deny the ancient tradition that a physician's duty is to help his patients help themselves," Black Doctor Arnquist said.

"I said no such thing!" Hugo Tanner cried, jumping to his feet. "But we must protect ourselves. We have no other power, nothing else to sell."

"And I say that if we must sell our medical skill for our own benefit first, then we are not worthy to be Physicians to anyone," Doctor Arnquist snapped.

"If we are really convinced that Earthmen are the best Physicians in the Galaxy, we need not be afraid of one Garvian."

Black Doctor Tanner stood up, shaking with rage. "Listen to him!" he cried to the others. "Once again he is defending this creature, and turning his back on common sense. All I ask is that we keep our skills among our own people, and avoid the contamination that will surely result . . ."

Doctor Tanner broke off, his face suddenly white. He coughed, clutching at his chest, and groped for his medicine box and the water glass. After a moment he caught his breath and shook his head. "There's nothing more I can say," he said weakly. "The decision is up to the rest of you."

Black Doctor Arnquist spread his hands. "Under the circumstances, I won't belabor the point," he said, "although I think it would be good if Doctor Tanner would pause in his activities long enough for the surgery that would make his anger less dangerous to his own life." Doctor Arnquist looked from face to face along the Council table. "The decision is yours, gentlemen, I would ask only that you consider what our highest calling as Physicians really is . . . a duty that overrides fear and selfishness. I believe Dal Timgar would be a good Physician, and that this is more important than the planet of his origin. I will vote to accept his application, and thus cancel out my colleague's negative vote. The deciding votes will be cast by the rest of you."

He sat down, and the White Doctor looked at Dal Timgar. "It would be good if you would wait outside," he said. "We will call you as soon as a decision is reached."

Dal waited in an anteroom, trying to put out of his mind the heated argument still raging in the Council chamber. Fuzzy was quivering with fright; un-

able to speak, the tiny creature nevertheless clearly experienced emotions. Dal knew there was a connection between the tiny pink creature's emotions and the peculiar talent that Black Doctor Arnquist had spoken of the night before. It was not a telepathic power that Dal and his people possessed. Just *what* it was was difficult to define, yet Dal knew that every Garvian depended upon it to some extent in dealing with people around him. He knew that when Fuzzy was sitting on his arm he could sense the emotions of those around him, and he knew that under certain circumstances he could wilfully change the feelings of others toward himself, not a great deal, perhaps, nor in any specific way, but just enough to make them look upon him and his wishes more favorably than they otherwise might.

Throughout his years on Hospital Earth he had vigilantly avoided using this strange talent of his. Already he was different enough from Earthmen physically. If his classmates had ever dreamed of the advantage that he had, minor as it was, his hopes of becoming a Physician would have been destroyed completely.

And in the Council Room he had kept his word to Doctor Arnquist. He had felt the temptation to deliberately mellow Black Doctor Tanner's anger, but he had turned it aside. He had answered questions that were asked of him, and listened to the

debate with a growing sense of hopelessness.

And now the chance was gone. The decision was being made.

At last the door opened, and an orderly nodded to him. Dal felt his legs tremble as he walked into the room and faced the semi-circle of Doctors.

The White Doctor took up a sheet of paper. "We have considered your application, and have reached a decision. You will be happy to know that your application for Assignment has been tentatively accepted. But this acceptance is not irrevocable. We are not willing to guarantee your ultimate acceptance as a Star Surgeon. You will be assigned aboard the General Practice Patrol Ship *Lancet*, leaving from Hospital Seattle next Tuesday. Your final acceptance as a Star Surgeon will depend entirely upon your conduct as a member of the Patrol Ship's crew." He smiled at Dal, and set the paper down. "Do you have any questions?"

"Just one," Dal managed to say. "Who will my crewmates be?"

"As is customary, a probationer from the Green Service and one from the Blue. Both have been specially selected by this Council. Your Blue Doctor will be Jack Alvarez, who has shown great promise in his training in Diagnostic Medicine."

"And the Green Doctor?"

"A young man named Frank Martin," the White Doctor said.

"Known to his friends, I believe, as 'Tiger.'"

CHAPTER 4

THE ship stood tall and straight on her launching pad, with the afternoon sunlight glinting on her hull. High up on her hull Dal Timgar could see a golden Caduceus emblazoned, the Symbol of the General Practice Patrol, and beneath it the ship's official name:

GPPS 238
LANCET

Dal lifted Fuzzy up on his shoulder. It seemed that everyone he had passed in the terminal had been looking at the colorful insignia on his collar and cuff.

"You'll get used to it," Tiger Martin chuckled as they waited for the jitney to take them across to the launching pad. "You're just the latest greenhorn in a squad of two hundred thousand men."

"It's still good to be wearing it," Dal said. He looked suspiciously at Tiger. "You must have known a lot more about that interview than you let on. Or was it just coincidence that we were assigned together?"

Tiger grinned. "I didn't know what was going to happen. But Doctor Arnquist asked me if I'd be willing to wait for assignment until the interview was over, so I said okay. He seemed to think you had a pretty good chance.

He figured that if you *were* assigned, it would be a good idea to have a friend on the Patrol Ship team."

"I won't argue about *that*," Dal said. "But who is the Blue Service man?"

Tiger's face darkened. "I don't know much about him," he said.

"Will he be in command?"

"Well . . . if he acts like most of the Blue Doctors I know, he'll *think* he's in command . . ."

The Gantry platform was just clanging to the ground. Tiger and Dal rode the platform up again, and moments later stepped through the entrance lock of the ship that would be their home base for months and perhaps years.

They found the bunk room to the rear of the control and lab sections.

"Looks like our man has already arrived," Tiger said, tossing down his duffel bag and looking around the cramped quarters. "Not exactly a luxury suite, I'd say. Wonder where he is?"

"Let's look up forward," Dal said.

They explored the ship, working their way up the central corridor past the communications and computer rooms and the laboratory into the main control and observation room. Here they found a thin dark-haired young man in a bright blue collar and cuff, sitting engrossed with a tape-reader.

He turned on the swivel stool. "So!" he said, "I was beginning

to wonder if you were ever going to get here."

"We ran into some delays," Tiger said. He grinned and held out his hand. "Jack Alvarez? Tiger Martin."

The Blue Doctor turned his eyes to Dal. "And I suppose this is the Garvian I've been hearing about, complete with his little pink stooge."

The moment they had walked in the door, Dal had felt Fuzzy crouch down tight against his shoulder. Now a wave of hostility struck his mind like a shower of ice water. He had never seen this thin, dark-haired man before, but he recognized this sharp impression of hatred and anger unmistakably.

"We're lucky to have Dal for a Red Doctor," Tiger said. "We almost didn't get him."

"Yes, I heard all about how lucky we are," Jack Alvarez said sourly. He looked Dal over from the gray fur on the top of his head to the spindly legs in the ill-fitting trousers. Then he shrugged in disgust. "A Garvian and his Fuzzy!" he muttered. "Let's hope one or the other of them knows something about surgery."

Dal and Tiger looked at each other, and Tiger shrugged. "It's all right," he said. "We know our jobs, and we'll manage."

Dal nodded. But if he had thought before that the assignment on the *Lancet* was going to be easy, he knew now that he was wrong.

Tiger Martin may have been Doctor Arnquist's selection as a

crewmate for him, but there was no question that the Blue Doctor was Black Doctor Hugo Tanner's choice.

But if there was trouble coming, it was postponed for the moment by common consent. In the few days before blast-off each of the three crewmen had work to accomplish, and each buried himself in it with a will.

The ship's medical and surgical supplies had to be inventoried. New supplies had to be stored. It was like preparing for an extended pack trip into wilderness country; once the *Lancet* left its home base on Hospital Earth it was a world to itself, equipped to support its Physician-crew completely. Like all Patrol Ships, the *Lancet* was equipped with automatic launching, navigation and drive mechanisms; no crew other than the three doctors was required.

The ship was responsible for patrolling an enormous area, including hundreds of stars and their planetary systems—yet its territory was only a tiny segment of the Galaxy. Landings were to be made at various specified planets with permanent Clinic outposts of Hospital Earth. Aside from these lonely Clinic contacts, the nearest port of call for the *Lancet* was one of the Hospital Ships that continuously worked slow orbits through the Star systems of the Confederation.

But a Hospital Ship was not to be called except in cases of ex-

treme need. The probationers on the Patrol Ships were expected to be self-sufficient. They were the first to answer the medical calls from any planet with a Medical Service Contract with Hospital Earth.

And since the first years of Hospital Earth, the fledgling Pill doctors in the General Practice Control—the self-styled “Galactic Peddlers”—had lived up to their responsibilities.

As he worked on his inventories, Dal Timgar thought of Doctor Arnquist's words to him after the Council had handed down its decision. “Remember that judgment and skill are two different things,” he had said. “You'll be judged both on the judgment you use in deciding the right thing to do, and on the skill you use in doing it. Until you can convince the Council that you have both the skill and the judgment of a good Physician, you will never get your Star. And you will be watched closely; Black Doctor Tanner and certain others will be waiting for the first opportunity to recall you from the *Lancet*.”

And now, as they worked to prepare the ship for service, Dal was determined that the opportunity would not arise. If errors and fumbles and mistakes were made by the crew of the *Lancet*, he thought grimly, it would not be Dal Timgar who made them.

The first night they met in Control Room to divide the many “extra-curricular” jobs involved in maintaining a Patrol Ship.

Tiger was the best man to handle the radio; he accepted the post without comment. "Jack, you should be in charge of the computer," he said "because you'll be the one who'll need the information for stores and supplies."

Jack shrugged. "I'd just as soon handle supplies, too," he said. When there's something I need I want to be sure it's going to be there without any goof-ups."

"I can handle it all right," Dal said.

Jack just scowled. "What about the contact man when we make landings?" he asked Tiger.

"Seems to me Dal would be the one for that, too," Tiger said. "His people are good mixers."

"But when somebody calls us for help, they expect to see an Earthman turn up in response. What are they going to think when a Patrol Ship lands and he walks out?"

Dal had been sitting silently. Now he shook his head. "I think Jack is right on this one," he said. It would be better for one of you to be contact man."

"Why?" Tiger said angrily. "You're as much of a Doctor from Hospital Earth as we are, and everybody shares the important jobs."

"That's fine," Dal said, "but if we are walking into a medical problem on a planet where the Patrol isn't too well known, the contact man by rights ought to be an Earthman."

Tiger yielded the point, but later, as he tried to get to sleep, Dal wondered for a moment. Maybe Tiger was right. Maybe he was just dodging a head-on clash with the Blue Doctor now and setting the stage for a real collision later . . .

But for all the advance arrangements to divide the ship's work, it was Dal Timgar who took complete control of the *Lancet* for the first two weeks of its cruise. For Dal the blast-off from Port of Seattle and the conversion into Koenig star-drive was nothing new. All his life Dal had traveled on the outgoing freighters of his father's fleet of Garvian traders; star-drive conversion was no surprise to him.

But for Jack and Tiger, it was their first experience in a star-drive ship, and the conversion to star-drive, as the *Lancet* was wrenched, crew and all, out of the normal space-time continuum, was far outside of normal human experience. The physical and emotional shock of the conversion hit Jack and Tiger like a sledge-hammer, and during the long hours while the ship was traveling in star-drive, the Earthmen were retching violently, too sick to budge from the bunk room. It took over two weeks in and out of Koenig drive before Jack and Tiger began to adjust themselves. During this time Dal carried the load of the ship's work alone.

Fortunately, the medical prob-

lems that came to the *Lancet* in the first few weeks were largely routine. The ship stopped at the specified contact points. Occasionally calls came in to the ship from Contact Planets in need of help. Usually the problems were easy to handle. On Singall III help was needed to deal with a new outbreak of a smallpox-like plague that had once decimated the population. The *Lancet* brought in supplies of a specific antiviral drug, and Tiger Martin spent two days showing Singallese physicians how to control further outbreaks with modern methods of immunization and antisepsis.

Another planet called for a Patrol Ship when a bridge-building disaster occurred; one of the beetle-like workmen had been badly crushed under a massive steel girder. Dal spent over eighteen hours straight with the patient in the *Lancet's* surgery, with Tiger administering anaesthesia and Jack preparing skeletal grafts from the freezer.

On another planet Jack faced his first real diagnostic challenge, and met the test with flying colors. These were routine calls, the kind of ordinary general medical work that the Patrol Ships were expected to handle. But the visits to the various planets were welcome breaks in the growing tension of Patrol Ship life.

From the first Jack Alvarez had made no pretense of pleasure at Dal's company, but now it seemed that he deliberately

sought opportunities to annoy Dal. The thin Blue Doctor's face set into an angry mold whenever Dal was around. He would get up and leave when Dal entered the control room, and complained loudly and bitterly at minor flaws in Dal's shipboard work. Nothing Dal did seemed to please him.

But Tiger had a worse time controlling himself at the Blue Doctor's digs and slights than Dal did. "It's like living in an armed camp," he complained one night when Jack had stalked angrily out of the bunk room. "Can't even open your mouth without having him jump down your throat."

"I know," Dal said.

"And he's doing it on purpose."

"Maybe so. But it won't help to lose your temper."

Tiger clenched a huge fist and slammed it into his palm. "He's just deliberately picking at you," he said. "You can't take that forever. Something's got to break."

"It's all right," Dal assured him. "I just ignore it."

But when Jack began to shift his attack to Fuzzy, Dal could ignore it no longer.

One night in the control room Jack turned angrily on Dal. "Tell your friend there to turn the other way before I lose my temper and splatter him all over the wall," he said, pointing to Fuzzy. "All he does is sit there and stare at me, and I'm getting fed up with it."

Fuzzy drew back, shivering on Dal's shoulder. Dal stroked the tiny creature, and Fuzzy's shoe-button eyes disappeared completely. "There" Dal said. "Is that better?"

Jack's face darkened suspiciously. "Well, what happened to them?" he demanded.

"What happened to what?"

"To his eyes, you idiot!"

Dal looked down at Fuzzy. "I don't see any eyes."

Jack jumped up from the stool. He scowled at Fuzzy as if commanding the eyes to come back again. All he saw was a small ball of pink fur. "Look, what is this? He's been blinking at me for a week. Sometimes he's got legs and sometimes he hasn't. Sometimes he looks fuzzy, and other times he hasn't got any hair at all."

"He's a pleomorph," Dal said. "No cellular structure at all, just a protein-colloid matrix. The only reason he has 'eyes' is because he thinks I want him to have eyes. If you don't like it, he won't have them any more."

"Well, that's very obliging," Jack said. "But why do you keep him around? What good does he do you, anyhow?" He reached out for Fuzzy, then jerked his finger back with a yelp. Blood dripped from the finger tip.

Jack's face slowly went white. "Why, he . . . he *bit* me!"

"You're lucky he didn't take a finger off," Dal said, trembling with anger. "He doesn't like you any more than I do, and you'll get bit every time you get near

him, so you'd better keep your hands to yourself from now on. I hope that's clear."

"Don't worry," Jack Alvarez said, "he won't get another chance. There are laws against keeping dangerous pets on Patrol Ships . . ."

Somewhere in the main corridor an alarm bell began buzzing. The door burst open and Tiger Martin's head appeared. "Hey, you two, let's get moving! We've got a call coming in, and it looks like a tough one. Come on back here!"

They headed back toward the radio room. The signal was coming through frantically. But as they crowded into the radio room, Dal felt Jack's hand on his arm. "If you think I was fooling, you're wrong," the Blue Doctor said through his teeth. "You've got twelve hours to get rid of him . . ."

CHAPTER 5

THE message was brief, repeated over and over: REQUIRE MEDICAL AID, URGENT. REPLY AT ONCE, followed by the code letters that designated the planet, its location, and the number of its Medical Service Contract.

Jack glanced at the code. "Morrue VIII," he said. "The eighth planet of a large Sol-type star, the only inhabited planet in the system with a single intelligent race, ursine evolutionary pattern." He looked at Tiger. "Teddy-bears, yet!"

"Mammals?" Tiger said.

"Looks like it. And they even hibernate."

Tiger settled down with ear-phones and transmitter to try to make contact with the Moruan planet, while Jack went forward to control and Dal started to work with the tape reader. The procedure to be followed was a well-established routine; acknowledge the call, estimate arrival time, relay the call and response to the programmers on Hospital Earth, prepare for star-drive, and start gathering data fast. With no hint of the nature of the trouble, their job was to get there, equipped with as much information about the planet and its people as time allowed.

Tiger calculated that two hours in Koenig drive would put the ship in the vicinity of the planet, with another hour required for landing procedures. He passed the word on to the others, and Dal began digging through the mass of information in the tape library on Morua VIII and its people. There was a wealth of data. Morua VIII had signed one of the first Medical Service Contracts with Hospital Earth, and a thorough medical, biochemical, social and psychological survey had been made on the people of that world. The Moruans were moderately intelligent creatures, warm-blooded air breathers with an oxygen-based metabolism. Their planet was cold, with seventeen per cent oxygen and much water vapor in its atmosphere. The natives were well fitted anatomically for their

climate, with thick black fur, broad flat hind feet and a four-inch layer of fat between their skin and their vital organs.

Dal buzzed Tiger. "Any word yet on the nature of the trouble?"

"Just got through to them," Tiger said. "They're really in an uproar. Sounds like they've started some kind of organ-transplant surgery and their native surgeon got cold feet halfway through and wants us to bail him out. This is going to be your show, Dal. Better check up on Moruan anatomy."

Dal took a deep breath and began running the anatomical atlas tapes through the reader, checking the critical points of Moruan anatomy. Oxygen-transfer system, circulatory system, renal filtration system . . . at first glance, there was little resemblance to any of the "typical" oxygen-breathing mammals Dal had studied in medical school. But bit by bit the anatomy came clear, and in half an hour of intense study Dal began to see how the inhabitants of Morua VIII were put together.

Satisfied for the moment, he then pulled the tapes that described the Moruans' own medical advancement. What were they doing attempting organ-transplantation, anyway? That was the kind of surgery that even experienced Star Surgeons preferred to take aboard the Hospital Ships, or back to Hospital Earth, where the finest

equipment and the most skilled assistants were available . . .

Just short of two hours later, The *Lancet* shifted back to normal space drive, and the cold yellow sun of the Moruan system swam into sight in the view-screen. The doctors watched the eighth planet as the ship went into descending orbit, skimming the outer atmosphere and settling into a landing pattern. It was cold below. A forty-mile gale howled across the landing field, sweeping clouds of powdery snow before it. A huge gawky vehicle shot out from the huddle of gray buildings almost the moment they touched down.

Jack went out through the entrance lock and down the ladder to meet the dark furry creatures that were bundling out of the vehicle below. Five minutes later he reappeared, frost forming on his blue collar, his face white as he looked at Dal. "You'd better get down there right away," he said, "and take your microsurgical instruments. Tiger, give me a hand with the anaesthesia tanks. They're keeping a patient alive with a heart-lung machine right now, and they can't finish the job. It looks like it might be bad."

As the surface car hurried toward the hospital, Dal probed for more information. The Moruan doctor's voice nearly deafened the Earthmen in the confined quarters of the car but Dal with the aid of the translator could piece together what had hap-

pened. By copying the techniques used by the surgeons of Hospital Earth, a Moruan surgeon had attempted the delicate job of replacing a diseased organ with a new, healthy one in a young male afflicted with cancer.

Dal looked up at the Moruan doctor. "What organ were you replacing?" he asked suspiciously.

"Oh, not the entire organ, just a segment," the Moruan said. "The tumor had caused an obstructive pneumonia—"

"Are you talking about a segment of *lung*?" Dal said, almost choking.

"Of course. That's where the tumor was."

Dal swallowed hard. "So you just decided to replace a segment."

"Yes. But something has gone wrong, we don't know what."

"I see. Do you have any microsurgical instruments at all?"

"Oh, yes," the Moruan rumbled proudly. "We made them ourselves, just for this case."

"You mean you've never attempted this procedure before?"

"This was the first time. We don't know where we went wrong."

"You went wrong when you thought about trying it," Dal muttered. "What anaesthesia?"

"Oxygen and alcohol vapor."

"And you have a heart-lung machine?"

"The finest available, on lease from Hospital Earth."

All the way through the city Dal continued the questioning.

By the time they reached the hospital he had an idea of the task that was facing him. He knew that it was going to be bad; he didn't realize just how bad until he walked into the operating room.

The patient was barely alive. The Moruan surgeons had gone into panic, and neglected the very fundamentals of physiological support for the creature on the table. Dal had to climb up on a platform just to examine the work already done, first with the naked eye, then scanning the operative field with the crude microscopic eyepiece.

"How long has he been anaesthetized?" he asked the shaggy operating surgeon.

"Over eighteen hours already."

"Any more blood on hand?"

"Perhaps six more liters."

"Well, you'd better get it into him. He's in shock right now."

The situation was bad. The anaesthesia had already gone on too long, and the blood chemistry record showed progressive failure. Dal stepped down from the platform, trying to decide the right thing to do. He had done micro-surgery before, plenty of it, and he knew the techniques necessary to complete the job, but the thought of attempting it chilled him. A dozen factors could go wrong. By now the patient was a dreadful risk for any surgeon. If he were to step in now, and the patient died, how would he explain not calling for help?

He stepped out to the scrub room where Tiger was waiting.

"Where's Jack?" he said.

"Went back to the ship for the rest of the surgical pack."

Dal shook his head. "We need a Hospital Ship."

A frown creased Tiger's face. "Dal, it would take six hours for a Hospital Ship to get here."

"I know that. But on the other hand . . ." Dal spread his hands. He felt Fuzzy crouching in a tight frightened lump in his pocket. He thought again of the delicate, painstaking microscopic work that remained to be done to bring the new section of lung into position to function, and he shook his head. "Look, these creatures hibernate," he said. "If we could get him cooled down enough, we could lighten the anaesthesia and maintain him as is, indefinitely."

"This is up to you," Tiger said. "If you think we should just hold tight, that's what we'll do."

"All right. I think we'd better. Have them notify Jack to signal for a Hospital Ship. We'll just try to stick it out."

Tiger left to pass the word, and Dal went back into the operating room. There would be Three-Star Surgeons on a Hospital Ship to handle this; it seemed an enormous relief to have the task out of his hands. Yet something was wriggling uncomfortably in the back of his mind, a quiet little voice saying *this isn't right, you should be doing this yourself right now instead of wasting precious time...*

The news that a Hospital Ship was being called seemed to upset the Moruans enormously. They began growling among themselves, moving back from the operating table.

"Then you can't save him?" the operating surgeon said.

"I think he can be saved, certainly!"

"But we thought you could just step in . . ."

"I could, but that would be taking chances that we don't need to take. We can maintain him until the Hospital Ship arrives."

The Moruan continued to growl ominously.

"What's eating them?" he asked Dal quietly.

"They don't want a Hospital Ship here very much," Dal said. "Afraid they'll look like fools all over the Confederation if the word gets out. But that's their worry. Ours is to keep this bruiser alive until the ship gets here."

They settled back to wait. The patient was clearly not doing well, even with the low body temperatures Dal had induced. A dozen times Dal was on the verge of stepping in. It was beginning to look now like a race with time, and precious minutes were passing by. He cursed himself now for not taking the bit in his teeth at the beginning; it had been a mistake in judgment to wait. Now, as minutes passed into hours it looked more and more like a mistake that was going to cost the life of a patient . . .

Then there was a murmur of

excitement outside the operating room, and word came in that another ship had been sighted landing. Dal clenched his fists, praying that the patient would last until the Hospital Ship crew arrived.

But the ship that was landing was not a Hospital Ship. It was a small ship hardly larger than a Patrol Ship, with just two passengers.

One was a Four-Star Surgeon, resplendent in flowing red cape and glistening silver insignia, a top-ranking physician in the Red Service.

The other passenger, gathering his black cloak and hood around him as he faced the blistering wind on the landing field, Was Black Doctor Hugo Tanner.

Moments after the Four-Star Surgeon arrived at the hospital, he was fully and unmistakably in command of the situation. He gave Dal an icy stare, scrubbed and gowned himself, and stalked past Dal to the crude Moruan micro-surgical control table.

It took exactly fifteen seconds to scan the entire operating field through the viewer, discussing the anatomy as the Moruan surgeon watched on a connecting screen. Then, without hesitation, the Surgeon began manipulating the micro-instruments. He did not even invite Dal to observe.

Ten minutes later he rose from the control table and threw the switch to stop the heart-lung machine. The patient took a gasping breath on his own, then an-

other and another. The Four-Star Surgeon stripped off his gown and gloves with a flourish. "It will be all right," he said to the Moruan physician. "An excellent job, Doctor, excellent!" he said. "Your technique was flawless, except for the tiny matter you have just observed . . ."

Outside the operating room and beyond earshot of the Moruan doctors the Four-Star Surgeon turned furiously to Dal. "Didn't you even bother to examine the operating field, Doctor? Where did you study Surgery? Couldn't you tell that the fools had practically finished the job themselves? All that was needed was a simple great-vessel graft, which an untrained idiot could have done blindfolded. And for this you call me clear from Hospital Earth!"

The Surgeon threw down his mask in disgust and stalked away, leaving Dal and Tiger staring at each other in dismay.

CHAPTER 6

"I THINK," Black Doctor Hugo Tanner said ominously, "that an explanation is in order. And believe me, gentlemen, it had better be a very sensible explanation, too."

The Pathologist had climbed through the entrance lock of the *Lancet* ten minutes before; now he faced the Patrol Ship's crew like a small but ominous black thunder cloud. Across the room, Jack Alvarez had a small satisfied smile on his face, while Tiger

sulked. Dal sat by himself with Fuzzy peering discreetly out of his jacket pocket.

He had known from the moment the Surgeon came out of the operating room that he was in trouble. And the more Dal considered his position, the more indefensible it appeared. His judgment had been poor. He had allowed himself to panic at a critical moment, and had failed to see how far the surgery had really progressed. In looking back, Dal could see now that it would have been far better judgment to proceed on his own.

But that was how it looked *now*, not *then*, and Dal knew that he would have to stand on what he had done, right or wrong. "What do you want me to say?" he asked. "I thought the Surgery might be over my head, and couldn't see attempting it if the patient could be maintained safely long enough for us to call for help."

"I see," the Black Doctor said. "You've done microsurgery before?"

"Yes, sir."

"And organ transplant work?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you just couldn't shoulder the responsibility the job involved when you got into a pinch without any help around," the Black Doctor growled.

"I just thought it would be safer to wait," Dal said helplessly.

"A good, conservative approach," Dr. Tanner sneered. "Of course, you realized that pro-

longed anaesthesia in itself could threaten that patient's life?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you saw the patient's condition steadily deteriorating while you waited, did you not?"

"It was too late to change my mind then," Dal said desperately.

"Indeed," the Black Doctor said. "And I suppose you would have allowed him to expire if we had not arrived at the time we did?"

Dal shook his head miserably. There was nothing he could answer to that. His fingers stole down to Fuzzy's soft warm body and he felt the little creature cling closer to his side.

The Black Doctor looked up at the others. "Well? What do the rest of you have to say?"

Jack Alvarez shrugged his shoulders. "Even I could see that *something* should be done without delay."

"And what does the Green Doctor think?"

Tiger shrugged. "We misjudged the situation, that's all. It came out fortunately for the patient, why make all the fuss about it?"

"Because any half-decent surgeon would have handled the case properly. If the Moruans see a Patrol Ship bring in one incompetent doctor, what are they going to expect the next time they have need for help?" The Black Doctor shook his head grimly. "This is the sort of responsibility that doctors on the Patrol Ships are expected to assume."

He turned to Dal Timgar. "You had ample warning," he said. "It was clearly understood that your assignment on this ship depended upon the fulfillment of the duties of Red Doctor here, and now at the first real test you turn and run instead of doing your job. It seems to me that the case is clear. On the authority of the Medical Service Code, I am now relieving you of duty..."

"Just a minute," Tiger Martin burst out.

The Black Doctor looked up at him. "Well?"

"Do you mean that you're relieving all three of us?"

"Of course I'm not relieving all three of you," the Black Doctor snapped. "You and Dr. Alvarez will remain on duty without a Red Doctor until a man is sent to replace this bungler. That also is provided for in the Code."

"But I seem to remember something in the Code about fixing responsibility before a man can be relieved."

Across the room Dal shook his head wearily. "You'd better keep out of it, Tiger," he said.

"Why should I let you be drummed out of the Patrol for something that wasn't even your fault?" Tiger said. He turned angrily to the Black Doctor. "Dal wasn't the one that wanted the Hospital Ship called," he said. "I was. If you're going to relieve somebody, you'd better make it me."

The Black Doctor glared at Tiger. "Whatever are you talking about?" he said.

"Just what I said. I insisted that we call the Hospital Ship. Dal wanted to go ahead and try to finish the case, and I wouldn't let him."

The Black Doctor slammed the file down on the table again. "Is this true, what he's saying?" he asked Dal.

"No, not a word of it," Dal said.

"Of course he won't admit it," Tiger said angrily. "He's afraid you'll kick me out too, but it's true, just the same."

"And what do *you* say?" the Black Doctor said, turning to Jack Alvarez.

"I didn't notice any conferences going on," Jack said.

"You were back at the ship getting the surgical pack," Tiger said.

The Black Doctor stared from Dal to Tiger, his face growing angrier by the minute. Then he took a capsule from his pocket, gulped it down with some water. "I ought to throw you both out on your ears," he snarled. "But I am forced to control myself. I mustn't allow myself to get angry. I suppose that you would swear to this statement of yours if it came to that?" he asked Tiger.

Tiger nodded. "Yes, sir, I certainly would."

"All right," the Black Doctor said tightly. The Code says that two opinions can properly decide any course of action. I am forced to support you officially. I will make a report of the incident to Patrol headquarters, and it will

go on the permanent records of all three of this ship's crew—including my personal opinion of the decision." He looked up at Dal. "But be very careful, my young friend. I'll be waiting for the first excuse to break you, and your green Doctor friend as well."

And trembling with rage, the Black Doctor picked up the folder, wrapped his cape around him, and marched out of the control room.

"Well, you put on a great show," Jack Alvarez said later as they prepared the ship for launching from the snow-swept landing field on Morua VIII. An hour before the Black Doctor's ship took off with Dr. Tanner and the Four-Star Surgeon aboard; now Jack broke the silence in the *Lancet's* control room. "A really great show. If you think you fooled Dr. Tanner with that story you're crazy, but I guess you got what you wanted. You put a black mark on all of our records, including mine. I hope you're satisfied."

"You know," Tiger said to Jack, "you're lucky."

"Really?"

"You're lucky I don't wipe that sneer off your face and scrub the walls with it." He stood up, towering over the dark-haired Blue Doctor. "You bet I'm satisfied. And if you got a black mark along with the rest of us, you earned it all the way."

"That still doesn't make it right," Dal said from across the

room. "It was my error, not yours."

"So you made a mistake," Tiger said. "You'll make a dozen more before you get your Star, and if none of them amount to any more than this one, you can be very happy." He scowled at Jack. "It's only thanks to our friend here that the Black Doctor heard about this at all."

"Then you think this thing was just used as an excuse to get at me?" Dal said.

"Ask him," Tiger said, looking at Jack again. "Ask him why a Black Doctor and a Four-Star Surgeon turned up when we just called for a Hospital Ship."

"I called the Hospital Ship," Jack said sullenly.

"But you called Dr. Tanner too," said Tiger.

"All right," Jack said, "but Dal was making a mistake. What if the patient had died while he was standing around waiting? Isn't that important?"

"It's important — but something else is more important. We've got a job to do on this ship, and we can't do it fighting each other. If we can't work as a team, we're sunk. We'll all be drummed out of the Patrol before a year is out." Tiger's face flushed with anger. "Well, I don't want a fight any more than Dal does, but if you pull any more sly ones, you'd better include me in the deal, because if Dal goes, I go too. And that's a promise."

There was silence for a moment as Jack stared up at Tiger's angry face. "You mean

you'd turn in your collar and cuff?" he said.

"If it came to that."

"I see." Jack sat down at the control panel. "I think you really mean it," he said soberly. "You really like the guy, don't you?"

"Maybe I do," Tiger said, "but I don't like to watch anybody get kicked around just because somebody else doesn't happen to like him."

The Blue Doctor shrugged and rose to his feet. "All right," he said to Tiger. "I guess I just didn't understand where you stood. I won't take the blame for anybody else's mistakes, but I guess we've got to work together in the tight spots." He gave Dal a lop-sided grin. "Welcome aboard," he said. "We'd better get this crate airborne before the people here come and cart it away."

Half an hour later the *Lancet* lifted through the atmospheric pull of the Moruan planet and moved on toward the next contact point, leaving the recovering patient in the hands of the native physicians. It was not until hours later that Dal noticed that Fuzzy had stopped quivering, and was resting happily and securely on his shoulder even when the Blue Doctor was near.

CHAPTER 7

ONCE more the crew of the *Lancet* settled down to routine, and the incident on Morua VIII seemed almost forgotten. Jack Alvarez was not exactly cor-

dial to Dal Timgar, but Tiger's angry outburst had startled him, as though he had never really considered that the big Earthman might honestly be attached to his friend from Garv II. Whatever the reason, much of the tension was gone when the *Lancet* had left the Moruan system behind. A great weight seemed to have been lifted, and if there was not quite peace on board, at least there was an uneasy truce.

Once again the *Lancet's* calls fell into a pattern. Landings on the outpost planets became routine, bright spots in a lonely and wandering existence.

And as the three doctors got used to the responsibilities of a Patrol Ship's rounds, and grew more confident of their ability to handle the problems thrust upon them, they found themselves working more and more efficiently as a team.

This was the way the General Practice Patrol was supposed to function. Each Doctor had unsuspected skills that came to light. There was no questioning Jack Alvarez's skill as a diagnostician. Tiger was not nearly as quick and clever as Jack; he needed more time to ponder a question of medical treatment, but he always seemed to come up with an answer, and his answers usually worked. Above all, Tiger's relations with the odd life-forms they encountered were invariably good; the creatures seemed to like him, and would follow his instructions faithfully.

Dal, too, had opportunities to demonstrate that his surgical skill and judgment was not universally faulty in spite of the trouble on Morua VIII. More than once he succeeded in almost impossible surgical cases where there was no time to call for help, and little by little he could sense Jack's growing confidence in his abilities, grudging though it might be.

Dal had ample time to mull over the thing that had happened on Morua VIII and to think about the interview with Black Doctor Tanner afterward. There was something about it that disturbed Dal, nibbling away persistently at his mind. He couldn't throw off the feeling that his own acceptance of Tiger's help had been wrong.

Part of it, he knew, was his native, inbred loathing for falsehood. Garvian traders were known throughout the Galaxy as much for their rigid adherence to their word as they were for the hard bargains they could drive; Dal had been enormously confused during his first months on Hospital Earth by the way Earthmen seemed to accept lying as part of their daily life, unconcerned about it as long as the falsehood could not be proven.

But something else about Tiger's defense of him bothered Dal far more than the falsehood, even though he could not pinpoint it. Talking to Tiger about it was no help; Tiger just grinned and told him to forget it but

even in the rush of shipboard activity it stubbornly refused to be forgotten . . .

One minor matter also helped to ease the tension between the doctors. Tiger brought a pink dispatch sheet in to Dal one day, grinning happily. "This ought to cheer you up," he said.

It was a brief news note, listed under "incidental items," "The Black Service of Pathology," it said, "has announced that Black Doctor Hugo Tanner will enter Hospital Philadelphia within the next week for prophylactic heart surgery, to correct the Medical Education Administrator's progressively disabling heart disease." The note went on to name the Surgeons who would officiate at the procedure.

Dal smiled and handed back the dispatch. "Maybe it will improve his temper," he said, "even if it does give him another fifty years of active life."

"Well, at least it will take him out of *our* hair for a while," Tiger said. "He won't have time to keep us under too close scrutiny."

Which, Dal was forced to admit, did not make him too unhappy.

Shipboard rounds kept all three doctors busy. Often, with contact landings, calls, and studying, it seemed only a brief time from sleep period to sleep period, but still they had some time for minor luxuries. Dal missed the tropical heat of his home planet; with a little home-made plumb-ing and ingenuity, he finally man-

aged to convert one of the ship's shower units into a steam bath to warm himself up to Garv II normal temperatures occasionally.

Fuzzy also became a part of shipboard routine. Once accustomed to Tiger and Jack and the surroundings aboard the ship, the little creature grew bored sitting on Dal's shoulder and wanted to be in the middle of things. Dal and Tiger built him a platform that hung from the ceiling of the control room and there Fuzzy would sit and swing by the hour, blinking happily at the activity going on all around him.

But for all the appearance of peace and agreement, there was still an undercurrent of tension between Dal and Jack. And once again when a major crisis almost developed Fuzzy was the center of the contention.

Dal Timgar knew that disaster had struck at the very moment it happened.

There was a small sound-proofed cubicle in the computer room for the doctors when they had odd moments to spend reading up on recent medical bulletins or reviewing their textbooks. Here on the tapes were things that Dal could grapple with; the hours he spent here were a welcome retreat from the confusing complexities of getting along with Jack and Tiger.

These long study periods were boring for Fuzzy. Frequently Dal would leave him to swing on his

platform or explore about the control cabin while he spent an hour or two at the tape-reader. Today Dal had been deeply immersed in a review of the intermediary metabolism of chlorine-breathing mammals, when something abruptly wrenched his attention from the tape.

It was as though a light had snapped off in his mind, or a door slammed shut. Suddenly he felt dreadfully, frighteningly alone, as if something inside him had been torn away. He sat bolt upright trying to spot the source of the trouble.

And then, almost instinctively, he knew what was wrong. He leapt to his feet, tore open the door to the cubicle and dashed down the hallway toward the control room. "Fuzzy!" he shouted, "Fuzzy, *where are you?*"

Tiger and Jack looked up in surprise as the Red Doctor burst into the room. Fuzzy's platform was hanging empty, gently swaying back and forth. Dal peered frantically around the room. There was no sign of the small pink creature.

"Where is he?" he demanded. "What's happened to Fuzzy?"

Jack blinked at the empty perch. "He was there just a minute ago. I saw him."

"Well, he's not there now, and something's wrong!" In a panic, Dal began searching the room, knocking over stools, scattering piles of paper, peering in every corner where Fuzzy might be concealed.

For a moment the others sat frozen, watching him. Then Tiger jumped to his feet. "He probably wandered off for a minute. He does that all the time . . ."

"No, it's something worse than that." Dal was almost choking on the words. "Something terrible has happened, I know it."

Jack Alvarez tossed the recorder down in disgust. "You and your miserable pet!" he said. "I knew we shouldn't have kept him on board."

Dal stared at Jack. Suddenly all the anger and bitterness of the past few weeks could no longer be held in. Without warning he hurled himself at the Blue Doctor's throat. "Where is he?" he cried. "What have you done with him? You've hated him every minute just like you hate me, only he's easier to pick on. Now where is he?"

Jack staggered back, trying to push the furious little Garvian away. "Get away from me! I didn't do anything!"

"You did too! Where is he!"

"I don't know . . ." Jack struggled to break free, but there was powerful strength in Dal's fingers for all his slight body build.

Dal felt a hand grip his collar then, and Tiger was dragging them apart like two dogs in a fight. "Now stop this!" he roared, holding them both at arm's length. "I said *stop it*. Jack didn't do anything to Fuzzy. He's been sitting here with me ever since you went back to the cubicle. He hasn't even budged."

"But he's *gone*," Dal panted. "Something's happened to him, I know it."

"How do you know?"

"I — I just know, I can feel it."

"All right, then let's find him," Tiger said. He's got to be somewhere on the ship. If he's in trouble, we're wasting time fighting."

Tiger let go, and Jack brushed off his shirt, his face very white.

"Well, let's get started looking," Tiger said.

They fanned out, with Jack still muttering to himself, and searched the control room inch by inch. There was no sign of Fuzzy. Dal searched with a frantic intensity. "He's not in here," he said at last, "he must have gone out somewhere. Come on, we got to find him."

They started searching the compartments off the rear corridor. For ten minutes there was no sound in the ship but the occasional slamming of a hatch, the grate of a desk drawer, the bang of a cabinet door. Dal worked through the maze of cubbyholes in the computer room with growing hopelessness. The frightening sense of loneliness and loss in his mind was overwhelming; he was almost physically ill. The feeling of *contact* that he had always had with Fuzzy was gone. As the minutes passed, hopelessness gave way to despair.

Then Jack gave a hoarse cry from the Lab. Dal stumbled down

the corridor, and almost collided with Tiger at the Lab door.

"I think we're too late," Jack said. "He's gotten into the formalin."

It was obvious what had happened. Fuzy had gone exploring. Several of the reagents bottles in the Laboratory had been knocked over as if he had been sampling them. The glass lid to the beaker of formalin had been pushed aside just enough to admit the little creature's two-inch girth. Now Fuzzy lay in the bottom of the beaker, a formless, shapeless blob of sickly gray jelly.

"Are you sure it's formalin?" Dal asked.

Jack poured off the fluid, and the acrid smell of formaldehyde that filled the room answered the question. "It's no good, Dal," he said, almost gently. "The stuff destroys protein, and that's about all he was. I'm sorry . . . I was beginning to like the little punk, even if he did get on my nerves."

Dal took the beaker. "Get me some saline," he said tightly. "And some nutrient broth."

Jack pulled out two jugs and poured their contents into an empty beaker. Dal popped the tiny limp form into the beaker and began massaging it. Great chunks of damaged tissue peeled off his hand, but he continued massaging and changing the solutions, first saline, then nutrient broth. "Get me some sponges and a blade."

Tiger brought them in. Carefully Dal began debriding the damaged outer layers. Jack and

Tiger watched; then Jack said, "Look, there's a tinge of pink in the middle."

Slowly the faint pink in the center grew more ruddy. Dal changed solutions again. "I think he'll make it," he said. "He has enormous regenerative powers." He looked up at Jack who was still watching the creature in the beaker almost solicitously. "I guess I made a fool of myself back there when I jumped you. I'm sorry. I just couldn't think straight. It was the first time I'd ever been—apart from him."

"I still say he doesn't belong aboard," Jack said. "This is a medical ship, not a menagerie. But I'm glad he's all right." He gave Fuzzy a final glance, and then headed back to the control room.

Fuzzy recovered, a much abashed and subdued Fuzzy, but apparently basically unharmed by his inadvertent swim in the deadly formalin bath. Presently he seemed to forget the experience altogether, and once again took his perch on the platform in the control room.

But Dal did not forget. He said little to Tiger and Jack, but the incident had shaken him severely. He had never before in his life experienced the almost paralyzing fear and helplessness that he had felt when Fuzzy had lost contact with him. It had seemed as though a vital part of him had suddenly been torn away, and the memory of the panic that followed sent chills

down his back and woke him up trembling from his sleep.

Happily, Jack Alvarez chose to let the matter rest where it was, and if anything, seemed more willing than before to be friendly. For the first time he seemed to take an active interest in Fuzzy, "chatting" with him when he thought no one was around, and bringing him occasional tid-bits of food after meals were over.

Once more life on the *Lancet* settled back to routine, only to have it shattered by an incident of quite a different nature. It was just after they had left a small planet in the Procyon System, one of the routine check-in points, that the strange call came in.

Jack and Dal were finishing dinner when Tiger came back from the control room. "Funny call," he said. "Anybody ever hear of a star called 31 Brucker?"

"Brucker?" Jack said. "It isn't on the list of contracts. What's the trouble?"

"I'm not sure," Tiger said. "I'm not even certain if it's a call or not. Come on up front and see what you think."

CHAPTER 8

IN THE control room the call board light was still blinking. "Here's the message that just came in," he said, "and if you can make sense of it, you're way ahead of me."

The message was a single

word, teletyped in the center of a blue dispatch sheet:

GREETINGS

"This is all?" Jack said.

"That's every bit of it. Our computer designated 31 Brucker as the origin from the direction and intensity of the signal.

"Beam back at the same direction and intensity and see what happens," Jack said.

Tiger turned the signal beam to coincide with the direction of the incoming message. "This is the GPP Ship *Lancet* from Hospital Earth," he called

"We have your contact. Can you hear me? Who are you and what do you want?"

There was a long delay. Then an answer came back. "Where is your ship now? Are you near us?"

"We need your coordinates in order to tell," Tiger said. "Who are you?"

Again a long pause and a howl of static. Then: "If you are far away it will be too late. Our time is running out, and we need help."

"Medical help?"

"Yes, but we have no time left, we are dying . . ."

"Are you a contract planet?" Tiger signaled. "What are your coordinates? Do we have a survey on you?"

There was a much longer pause. Then: "No, we have no contract. We are all dying, but if you must have a contract to come . . ."

"Not at all," Tiger sent back. "We're coming. Keep your frequency open. We will contact again when we are closer."

"They sound desperate," Dal said. "We'd better go there, contract or no contract."

"Of course we'll go there, you idiot! This is our golden chance to seal a contract with a new planet."

All three of the doctors fell to work trying to identify the mysterious caller. Dal began searching the Information File for data on 31 Brucker, punching all the reference tags he could think of, as well as the Galactic coordinates of the planet. When a planet without a Medical Service Contract called a GPP Ship for help, there was always a chance that a brand new contract might be signed if the call was successful.

Dal had his information gathered first — a disappointingly small amount indeed. In the *Lancet's* data bank there were only two scraps of data available on the 31 Brucker system.

"Is this all you could find?" Tiger said, staring at the information slips.

"There's just nothing else there," Dal said. "This one is a description and classification of the star, and it doesn't sound like the one who wrote it had even been near it."

"He hadn't," Tiger said. "This is a routine radio-telescopic survey report. The star is a red giant. Big and cold, with four planets. None of the planets

thought to be habitable by man. What's the other item?"

"An exploratory report on the outer planet, done eight hundred years ago. Says it's an Earth-type planet, and not much else. Gives reference to the full report in the Confederation files. Not a word about an intelligent race living there."

"Well, maybe Jack's got a bit more for us from Central Records," Tiger said. "If the place has been explored, there must be *some* information about the inhabitants."

But Jack also came up with a blank.

"It doesn't even say there are any people there. Not a word about any kind of life form."

"Well, if we're getting messages from there, somebody must be sending them," Dal said. "But there's a way to find out. How soon can we convert to star drive?"

"As soon as we can get strapped down," Tiger said.

"Then send our coordinates to the Confederation Headquarters on Garv II with my serial number and request the Confederation records on the place. They'll be here when we reconvert."

The star that they were seeking was a long distance away; they were in Koenig drive for hours before they reconverted.

The star called 31 Brucker was close then. This mammoth red giant did not look so cold now, as they stared at it in the view screen. From the *Lancet's* position, no planets at all were visi-

ble to the naked eye, but with the telescope Jack soon found two inside the star's envelope of gas and one tiny one outside.

Already the radio was chattering with two powerful signals coming in. One came from the Galactic Confederation Headquarters on Garv II; the other was a good clear signal from very close range, unquestionably beamed to them from the planet in distress.

They watched as the Confederation report came clacking off the teletype, and they stared at it unbelieving.

"This red giant star," the report read, "was studied in the usual fashion. It was found to have seven planets, all but one lying within the tenuous outer gas envelope of the star itself. The seventh planet has an atmosphere of its own, and travels an orbit, well outside the star surface. This planet was selected for landing and exploration. The planet is inhabited by numerous small unintelligent animal species which seem well-adapted to the semi-arid conditions. Of higher animals and mammals only two species were discovered, and of these the most highly developed was an erect biped with an integrated central nervous system and the intelligence level of a Garvian *drachma*."

"How smart is that?" Jack said.

"Idiot-level," Dal said glumly.

"Well, *something* has happened down there since then. Idiots

can't build interstellar radios." Jack turned to Tiger. "Are you getting them?"

Tiger nodded. A voice was coming over the speaker, hesitant and apologetic, using the Common Tongue of the Galactic Confederation. "How soon can you come?" the voice was asking. "There is not much time."

"But who are you?" Tiger asked. "What's wrong down there?"

"We are sick, dying, thousands of us. But if you have other work that is more pressing, we would not want to delay you . . ."

Jack shook his head, frowning. "I don't get this," he said. "Why are they so hesitant?"

Tiger covered the speaker with his hand. "Sounds like they need help but don't quite dare ask for it." He spoke into the microphone again. "You have our position—can you send up a spokesman to tell us your problem?"

A long pause, and then the voice came back wearily. "It will be done. Stand by to receive him."

Tiger snapped off the radio receiver and looked up triumphantly at the others. "Now we're getting somewhere. We've got a chance to sew up a contract, and that could mean a Star for every one of us."

"I don't like this," Dal said. "Where were these people when the Confederation ship was here?"

"I don't know," Jack said, "but I'll bet you both that we

have quite a time finding out. I don't know about you, but I think this whole business has a very strange smell . . ."

There was nothing strange about the Bruckian ship when it finally came into view. It was a standard design, surface-launching, interplanetary craft. On the intercom view screens they saw the small suited figure cross from his ship into the *Lancet's* lock, and watched as the sprays of formalin washed down the outside of his suit.

Moments later the creature stepped out of the decontamination chamber. He was small and humanoid, with tiny fragile bones and pale, hairless skin. He stood no more than four feet high; more than anything else, he looked like a very intelligent monkey with a diminutive space suit fitting his fragile body. When he spoke, Dal recognized the flowing syllables of the universal language of the Galactic Confederation.

"How do you know the Common Tongue?" he said.

"We know the language well," the Bruckian said. "We hear the Confederation broadcasts and we also know of the good works of the Ships from Hospital Earth. Now we appeal to you."

"But you gave us no information, nothing to go on," Jack said.

"There was no time," the creature said. "Death is stalking our land, and the people are falling at their plows. Thousands of us

are dying. Even I am infected and soon will be dead. Unless you can find a way to help us quickly, it will be too late, and my people will be wiped from the face of the planet . . ."

Jack looked grimly at Tiger and Dal. "Well," he said, "I guess that answers our question, all right. It looks as if we have a plague planet on our hands, whether we like it or not."

CHAPTER 9

SLOWLY and patiently they drew the story from the emissary from the seventh planet of 31 Brucker.

Whoever they were and wherever they had been when the Confederation Ship had landed, there was unquestionably an intelligent race now inhabiting this lonely planet. A few well-selected questions revealed that they had control of atomic power, a workable star drive and an excellent understanding of the existence and functions of the Galactic Confederation of worlds, and of Hospital Earth's work as physician to the Galaxy.

The plague had begun six months before, striking great masses of the people. First three out of ten had been stricken, then four, then five. The course of the disease was invariably the same: first illness, weakness, loss of energy and interest, then gradually a fading away of intelligent responses, leaving thousands of creatures walking blank-faced and idiot-like about

the streets and countryside. After an interval of a week or so, death invariably ensued.

Other than a description of the behavior of the victims, the emissary could not tell them much about the sickness. He had no concepts to help him understand even questions that were asked. Finally the doctors retired to the control room for a puzzled conference. "It's got to be an organism of some sort that's doing it," Dal said. "Probably a virus."

"But how do we know?" Tiger said. "We know nothing about them except what we can see and we aren't equipped to do a complete biochemical and medical survey."

"We've got to do it anyway," Jack said. "If we can just learn enough about them to be sure it's an infectious illness, we might stand a chance of isolating the organism that's causing the trouble, and finding a drug that will cure it."

"I'm not so sure they want us to cure it," Dal said slowly.

"Well, what do you think that they're calling us for?" Jack said.

"Oh, they want us to *stop* it, whatever it is. But they're not interested in individual cures. They're afraid of being wiped out altogether."

"Then you think it's immunization against it that they want?"

"Something like that. And if this were a virus infection, we might only need to find an anti-

body for inoculation to stop it in its tracks."

"Well, we don't have much time," Jack said. "We need a good look at the planet and some more of the natives—both infected and healthy. We'd better make arrangements as fast as we can."

Unquestionably the first job was diagnosis, discovering the exact nature of the illness and studying the afflicted people. This was Jack's responsibility; he was the diagnostician. It was decided that Jack and Tiger would visit the planet's surface at once by lifeboat while Dal stayed on the ship in orbit and set up the reagents and examining techniques that would be needed to measure the basic physical and biochemical characteristics of the Bruckians.

Yet in all the excitement of planning, Dal could not throw off the instinctive voice of caution that seemed to say *watch out, be careful, go slowly! This may not be what it seems to be; you may be walking into a trap . . .*

But it was only a faint voice, and easy to thrust aside as the planning went ahead full speed.

It did not take very long for the crew of the *Lancet* to realize that there was something very odd indeed about the small, self-effacing inhabitants of 31 Brucker VII.

When Tiger and Jack came back to the *Lancet* after their first trip to the planet's surface, they were visibly shaken. "Those

people!" Jack said. "They don't fit into *any* kind of pattern. They've got houses, but every one of them is like every other one, and they're all crammed together in tight little bunches, with nothing for miles in between. They've got an advanced technology, but they don't use it. Those cities down there look almost as though somebody else had built them, and now the people that are living there don't have any use for them."

"It's more than that," Tiger said. "They know how to use the machines they've got. They just don't seem to want to."

"Well, it doesn't add up, to me," Jack said. "There are thousands of towns and cities down there, all of them miles apart, and yet they had to go dig an old rusty jet scooter out of storage just specially to take us from one place to another. I know things can get disorganized with a plague in the land, but this plague just hasn't been going on that long."

"What about the sickness?" Dal asked. "Is it as bad as it sounded?"

"Worse, if anything," Tiger said gloomily. Graphically, he described the conditions they had found among the stricken people. There was no question that a plague was stalking the land. Those who had not yet succumbed to the illness were nursing and feeding the sick ones, but these unaffected ones were growing scarcer and scarcer. The whole living population seemed

resigned to hopelessness, hardly noticing the strangers from the Patrol Ship.

But worst of all were those in the final stages of the disease, wandering vaguely about the street, their faces blank and their jaws slack as though they were living in a silent world of their own, cut off from contact with the rest.

"But don't they have *any* knowledge of antiseptics or isolation?" Dal said.

Tiger shook his head. "Not that we could see. They think the plague is some kind of curse, and they had no idea that it might be kept from spreading."

Already Tiger and Jack had taken first routine steps to deal with the sickness. They gave orders to move the unaffected people in every town and village away to isolated barracks and stockades. Together they had collected standard testing specimens of body fluids and tissue from both healthy and afflicted citizens, and come back to the *Lancet* for a breather.

Now all three doctors began work on the specimens. Cultures were inoculated with specimens from respiratory tract, blood, and tissue taken from both sick and well. Half a dozen of the victims of the disease already dead were brought to the ship under specially controlled conditions for autopsy examination, to reveal both the normal anatomical characteristics of this strange race of people and the damage the disease was doing. Down on the sur-

face Tiger had already inoculated a dozen of the healthy ones with various radioactive isotopes to help outline the normal metabolism and biochemistry of the people. After a short sleep period on the *Lancet*, he went back down alone to follow up on these, leaving Dal and Jack to carry on the survey work in the ship's lab.

Alone on the ship, Dal and Jack found themselves working as a well organized team. There was no time here for argument or duplicated efforts. Jack seemed to have forgotten his previous antagonism completely. There was a crisis here, and more work than three men could possibly do in the time available.

Bit by bit they divided the labor, checking in with Tiger by radio on the results of the isotopes studies he was running on the planet's surface. Bit by bit the data was collected, and Earthman and Garvian worked more closely than ever before as the task that faced them appeared more and more formidable.

Forty-eight hours later Tiger returned to the ship looking as though he had been trampled in a crowd. "No sleep, that's all," he said breathlessly. "No time for it. I swear I ran those tests a dozen times and I still didn't get any answers that made sense."

"The results you were sending up sounded plenty strange," Jack said. "What was the trouble?"

"I don't know," Tiger said, "but if we're looking for a bio-

logical pattern here, we haven't found it yet as far as I can see."

"No, we certainly haven't," Dal exploded. "I thought I was doing something wrong somehow, because these blood chemistries I've been doing don't make any kind of sense. I can't even find a normal level for blood sugar, and as for the enzyme systems . . ." He tossed a sheaf of notes down on the counter in disgust. "How these people could be alive and healthy with a botched-up metabolism like this is more than I can see. I've never heard of anything like it."

"What kind of pathology did you find?" Tiger wanted to know.

"Nothing," Dal said. "Nothing at all. I did autopsies on the six that you brought up here and I can't find any reason why they should be dying. Any luck with the cultures?"

Jack shook his head glumly. "No growth on any of the plates. At first I thought I had something going, but if I did, it died, and I can't find any sign of it in the filtrates."

"But we've got to have *something* to work on," Tiger said desperately. "Look, there are some things that always measure out the same in any intelligent creature no matter where he comes from. The basic biochemical reactions are always the same."

"Not here, they aren't," Dal said. "If you don't believe it, look for yourself."

They carried the heap of notes

they had collected out into the control room and began sifting and organizing the data. Hours passed, and they were farther from an answer than when they began.

Because this data did not fit a pattern. It was *different*. No two individuals showed the same reactions. In every test the results were either flatly impossible or completely the opposite of what was expected.

"There's *got* to be a laboratory error," Dal said wearily. "We must have slipped up somewhere."

"But I don't see where," Jack said. Of the three of them, Jack was beginning to show the strain the most. This was his special field, the place where he was supposed to excel, and he was making no headway. Nothing was happening. He moved restlessly from lab to control room, checking and rechecking things, trying to find some sign of order in the chaos.

"Without a diagnosis, we can't do a thing," he said. "Until we have that, our hands are tied, and we aren't even getting close to it. We don't even know whether this is a bacteria, or a virus, or what it is. Maybe the Bruckians are right. Maybe it's a curse."

"I doubt it," Tiger said sourly.

"But what other answer do we have? The more we dig into this, the farther away we seem to get."

"Do you want to call for help?" Tiger said.

Jack shook his head helplessly. "I'm beginning to think we should have called for help a long time ago," he said. "If either of you can think of an answer, it's all yours, and I'll admit it to Black Doctor Tanner himself."

Ironically, the first glimpse of the truth came from the direction they least expected.

From the very beginning Fuzzy had been watching the proceedings from his perch on the swinging platform in the control room. If he sensed that Dal Timgar was ignoring him much of the time, he showed no sign of resentment. Everyone assumed that Fuzzy was just being tolerant of the situation, until Dal realized that his little pink friend had not asked for food for over 24 hours.

"So what?" Tiger shrugged. He didn't want to bother you while you were busy."

Dal shook his head. "That wouldn't make any difference to Fuzzy. When he gets hungry, he gets hungry, and he's pretty self-centered. It wouldn't matter what I was doing. He should have been screaming for food hours ago."

Dal walked over to the platform and peered down at his pink friend in alarm. "Fuzzy, what's the matter with you?"

"Do you think something's wrong with him?" Jack said, looking up suddenly. "Looks like he's having trouble keeping his eyes open."

"His color isn't right, either,"

Tiger said. "He looks kind of blue."

Quite suddenly the little black eyes closed and Fuzzy began to tremble violently. He drew himself up into a tight pink globule as the fuzz-like hair disappeared from view.

Something was unmistakably wrong. As he held the shivering creature, Dal was suddenly aware that something had been nibbling at the back of his mind for hours. Now as he looked at Fuzzy the impression grew so strong it almost made him cry out.

"Jack," he said, "where is our biggest virus filter?"

Jack stared at him. "Virus filter? I just took it out of the autoclave an hour ago."

"Get it," Dal said, "and the suction machine too. *Quickly!*"

Jack got the big porcelain virus filter and the suction tubing attached to it. Swiftly Dal dumped the limp little creature into the top of the filter jar, poured in some sterile saline, and started the suction.

Tiger and Jack watched him in amazement. "What are you doing?" Tiger said.

"Filtering him," Dal said. "He's infected. He must have contacted the stuff somehow, maybe when our little visitor came on board the other day. If it's a virus that's causing this plague, it may be large enough for the filter to hold it back and let Fuzzy's molecular structure through."

They watched and sure enough a bluish-pink fluid began moving

down through the porcelain filter, and dripping through the funnel into the beaker below. Each drop coalesced in the beaker as it fell until Fuzzy's whole body had been sucked through the filter and into the jar below. He was still not quite his normal pink color, but as the filter went dry, a pair of frightened shoe-button eyes appeared and he poked up a pair of ears. Presently the fuzz began appearing on his body again.

And on the top of the filter lay a faint gray film. Dal slipped on a mask and gloves, and scraped bits of the film from the filter with a spatula. "I think we have it," he said. "The virus that's causing the plague on this planet."

CHAPTER 10

IT WAS a virus, beyond doubt. In the culture tubes in the *Lancet's* incubators, it would start to grow nicely, and then falter and die, but when guinea pigs were inoculated in the ship's laboratory, the substance proved its virulence. The animals injected with tiny bits of the substance grew sick within hours and very quickly died.

Here at last was something they could grapple with, something so common among the races of the Galaxy that the doctors felt certain that they could cope with it. Very few, if any, higher life forms existed that did not have some sort of submicroscopic parasite afflicting them; bacte-

rial infection was a threat on every inhabited world, and the viruses—the tiniest of all submicroscopic organisms—were the most difficult and dangerous of them all.

And yet virus plagues had been dealt with before, and they could be dealt with again.

Jack radioed down to the planet's surface that the diagnosis had been made, and there was a new flicker of hopefulness in the Bruckian's response.

But the virus that they had isolated was no ordinary virus. It proved resistant to every one of the antibiotics and antiviral agents in the *Lancet's* stockroom.

"If one of the drugs would only just slow it up a little, we'd be ahead," Tiger said in perplexity. "We don't have anything that even touches it, not even the purified globulins."

"What about antibodies from the infected people?" Jack suggested.

"These people don't seem to be making any antibodies. They don't have any natural defense against the virus at all."

"But there's always *some* kind of response to a virus infection!"

"Not here," Tiger said. "So far not a single one has recovered once the thing started. They all just go ahead and die."

"I wonder," Dal said, "if Fuzzy had any defense. Maybe Fuzzy developed antibodies against the virus while he was infected. Remember, he doesn't have a rigid physiological structure like we do. He's mostly just

basic protein, and he can synthesize pretty much anything he wants or needs to."

Jack blinked. "It's an idea, at least. Is there any way we can get some of his body fluid away from him? Without getting bit, I mean?"

"No problem there," Dal said. "He can regenerate pretty fast if he has enough of the right kind of food. He won't miss an ounce or two of excess tissue."

He took a beaker over to Fuzzy's platform and began squeezing off a little blob of pink tissue. With the addition of a small amount of saline, the tissue dispersed into thin pink suspension. They had the fluid.

In the laboratory they injected two guinea pigs with a tiny bit of the pink solution. The effect was almost unbelievable. Within twenty minutes the injected animals began to perk up, their eyes brighter, nibbling at the food in their cages, while the ones that had not been injected got sicker and sicker.

"Well, there's our answer," Jack said eagerly. "If we can get some of this stuff into our friends down below, we may be able to protect the healthy ones from getting the plague, and cure the sick ones as well. If we still have enough time, that is."

They had landing permission from the Bruckian spokesman within minutes, and an hour later the *Lancet* made an orderly landing on a newly-paved landing field near one of the central cities

on the seventh planet of 31 Brucker.

Dal was appalled at the ravages of the disease that they had come to fight. Only one out of ten of the Bruckians was still uninfected, and another three out of the ten were clearly in the late stages of the disease, walking about blankly and blindly, stumbling into things in their paths, falling to the ground and lying mute and helpless until death came to release them.

The spokesman who had first come up to the *Lancet* was dead, but another had taken his place as negotiator with the doctors—an older, thinner Bruckian who looked as if he carried the total burden of his people on his shoulders. He greeted them eagerly at the landing field. "You have found a solution!" he cried. "You have found a way to turn the tide—but hurry! Every moment now is precious."

It took some time to explain to the spokesman why they could not begin then and there with the mass inoculations against the plague. First, they needed test cases. Controls were needed, to be certain that the antibody suspension alone was bringing about the changes seen and not something else. At last, orders went out from the spokesman. Two hundred uninfected Bruckians were admitted to a large roped-off area near the ship, and another two hundred in late stages of the disease were led stumbling into another closed area. Preliminary skin-tests of

the antibody suspension showed no sign of untoward reaction. Dal began filling syringes while Tiger and Jack started inoculating the two groups.

"If it works with these cases, it will be simple to immunize the whole population," Tiger said. "From the amounts we used on the guinea pigs, it looks as if only tiny amounts are needed. We may even be able to train the Bruckians to give the injections themselves."

"And if it works we ought to have a brand new Medical Service Contract ready for signature with Hospital Earth," Jack added eagerly.

And even before they were finished with the inoculations, it was apparent that they were taking effect. Not one of the infected patients died after inoculation was completed. By the time the four hundred doses were administered, one thing seemed certain: that the antibody was checking the deadly march of the disease in some way.

Back aboard the ship they started preparing a larger quantity of the antibody suspension. Fuzzy had regenerated back to normal weight again, and much to Dal's delight had been splitting off small segments of pink protoplasm in a circle all around him, as though anticipating further demands on his resources. A quick test-run showed that the antibody was also being regenerated. Fuzzy was voraciously hungry, but the material in

the second batch was still as powerful as in the first.

The doctors were almost ready to go back down, loaded with enough inoculum and syringes to equip themselves and a dozen field workers when Jack suddenly stopped what he was doing and cocked an ear toward the entrance lock.

"What's wrong?" Dal said.

"Listen a minute,"

They stopped to listen. "I don't hear anything," Tiger said.

Jack nodded. "I know. That's what I mean. They were holler-ing their heads off when we came back aboard. Why so quiet now?"

He crossed over to the view screen scanning the field below, and flipped on the switch. For a moment he just stared. Then he said: "Come here a minute. I don't like the looks of this at all."

Dal and Tiger crowded up to the screen. "What's the matter?" Tiger said. "I don't see . . . *wait a minute!*"

"Yes, you'd better look again," Jack said. "What do you think, Dal?"

"We'd better get down there fast," Dal said, "and see what's going on. It looks to me like we've got a tiger by the tail . . ."

They climbed down the ladder once again, with the antibody flasks and sterile syringes strapped ot their backs. But this time the greeting was different from before.

The Bruckian spokesman and the others who had not yet been inoculated drew back from them in terror as they stepped to the

ground. Before, the people on the field had crowded in eagerly around the ship; now they were standing in silent groups staring at the doctors fearfully and muttering among themselves.

But the doctors could only see the inoculated people in the two roped-off areas. Off to the right among the infected Bruckians who had received the antibody there were no new dead—but there was no change for the better, either. The sick creatures drifted about aimlessly, milling like animals in a cage, their faces blank, their jaws slack, hands wandering foolishly. Not one of them had begun reacting normally, not one showed any sign of recognition or recovery.

But the real horror was on the other side of the field. Here were the healthy ones, the uninfected ones who had received preventive inoculations. A few hours before they had been left standing in quiet, happy groups, talking among themselves, laughing and joking . . .

But now they weren't talking any more. They stared across at the doctors with slack faces and dazed eyes, their feet shuffling aimlessly in the dust. All were alive, but only half-alive. The intelligence and alertness was gone from their faces; they were like the empty shells of the creatures they had been a few hours before.

Jack turned to the Bruckian spokesman in alarm. "What's happened here?" he said, "What's become of the ones we inocu-

lated? Where have you taken them?"

The spokesman shrank back as though afraid Jack might reach out to touch him. "Taken them!" he cried. "We have moved none of them! Those are the ones you poisoned with your needles. What have you done to make them like this?"

"It—it must be some sort of temporary reaction to the injection," Jack faltered. "There was nothing that we used that could possibly have given them the disease, we only used a substance to help them fight it off . . ."

The spokesman was shaking his fist angrily. "It's no reaction, it is the plague itself! What kind of evil are you doing? You came here to help us, and instead you bring us more misery. Do we not have enough of that to please you?"

Swiftly the doctors began examining the patients in both enclosures, and on each side they found the same picture. One by one they checked the ones that had previously been untouched by the plague, and found only the sagging jaws and the idiot stares.

"There's no sense examining every one," Tiger said finally. "They're all the same, every one."

"But this is impossible," Jack said, glancing apprehensively at the growing mob of angry Bruckians outside the stockades. "What could have happened? What have we done?"

"I don't know," Tiger said. "But whatever we've done has

turned into a boomerang. We knew that the antibody might not work, and the disease might just go right ahead, but we didn't anticipate anything like this."

"Maybe some foreign protein got into the batch," Dal said.

Tiger shook his head. "It wouldn't behave like *this*. And we were careful getting it ready. All we've done was inject an antibody against a specific virus. All it could have done was to kill the virus, but these people act as though they're infected now."

"But they're not dying," Dal said. "And the sick ones we injected stopped dying, too."

"So what do we do now?" Jack said.

"Get one of these that changed like this aboard ship and go over him with a fine-toothed comb. We've got to find out what's happened."

He led one of the stricken Bruckians by the hand like a mindless dummy across the field toward the little group where the spokesman and his party stood. The crowd on the field was moving in closer; an angry cry went up when Dal touched the sick creature.

"You'll have to keep this crowd under control," Dal said to the spokesman. "We're going to take this one aboard the ship to examine him to see what this reaction could be, but this mob is beginning to sound dangerous."

"They're afraid," the spokesman said. "They want to know

what you've done to them, what this new curse is that you bring in your syringes."

"It's not a curse, but something has gone wrong. We need to learn what, in order to deal with it."

"The people are afraid and angry," the spokesman said. "I don't know how long I can control them."

And indeed, the attitude of the crowd around the ship was very strange. They were not just fearful; they were terrified. As the doctors walked back to the ship leading the stricken Bruckian behind them, the people shrank back with dreadful cries, holding up their hands as if to ward off some monstrous evil. Before in the worst throes of the plague, there had been no sign of this kind of reaction. The people had seemed apathetic and miserable, resigned hopelessly to their fate, but now they were reacting in abject terror. It almost seemed that they were more afraid of these walking shells of their former selves than they were of the disease itself . . .

But as the doctors started up the ladder toward the entrance lock the crowd surged in toward them with fists raised in anger. "We'd better get help, and fast," Jack said as he slammed the entrance lock behind them. "I don't like the looks of this a bit. Dal, we'd better see what we can learn from this poor creature here."

As Tiger headed for the ear-

phones, Dal and Jack went to work once again, checking the blood and other body fluids from the stricken Bruckian. But now, incredibly, the results of their tests were quite different from those they had obtained before. The blood sugar and protein determinations fell into the pattern they had originally expected for a creature of this type. Even more surprising, the level of the antibody against the plague virus was high . . . far higher than it could have been from the tiny amount injected into the creature.

"They must have been making it themselves," Dal said, "and our inoculation was just the straw that broke the camel's back. All of those people must have been on the brink of symptoms of the infection, and all we did was add to the natural defenses they were already making."

"Then why did the symptoms appear?" Jack said. "If that's true, we should have been *helping* them, and look at them now!"

Tiger appeared at the door, scowling. "We've got real trouble, now," he said. "I can't get through to a Hospital Ship. In fact, I can't get a message out at all. These people are jamming our radios."

"But why?" Dal said.

"I don't know, but take a look outside there."

Through the view screen it seemed as though the whole field around the ship had filled up with the crowd. The first reac-

tion of terror now seemed to have given way to blind fury; the people were shouting angrily, waving their clenched fists at the ship as the spokesman tried to hold them back.

Then there was a resounding crash from somewhere below, and the ship lurched, throwing the doctors to the floor. They staggered to their feet as another blow jolted the ship, and another.

"Let's get a Screen up," Tiger shouted. "Jack, get the engines going. They're trying to board us, and I don't think it'll be much fun if they ever break in."

In control room they threw the switches that activated a powerful protective energy screen around the ship. It was a device that was carried by all GPP Ships as a means of protection against physical attack. When activated, an energy screen was virtually impregnable, but it could only be used briefly; the power it required placed an enormous drain on a ship's energy resources, and a year's nuclear fuel could be consumed in a few hours.

Now the Screen served its purpose. The ship steadied, still vibrating from the last assault, and the noise from below ceased abruptly. But when Jack threw the switches to start the engines, nothing happened at all.

"Look at that!" he cried, staring at the motionless dials. "They're jamming our electrical system somehow. I can't get any turn-over."

"Try it again," Tiger said. "We've got to get out of here. If they break into here, we're done for."

"They can't break through the screen," Dal said.

"Not as long as it lasts. But we can't keep it up indefinitely."

Once again they tried the radio equipment. There was no response but the harsh static of the jamming signal from the ground below. "It's no good," Tiger said finally. "We're stuck here, and we can't even holler for help. You'd think if they were so scared of us they'd be glad to see us go."

"I think there's more to it than that," Dal said thoughtfully. "This whole business has been crazy from the start. This just fits in with all the rest." He picked Fuzzy off his perch and set him on his shoulder as if to protect him from some unsuspected threat. "Maybe they're afraid of us, I don't know. But I think they're afraid of something else a whole lot worse."

There was nothing to be done but to wait and stare hopelessly at the mass of notes and records that they had collected on the people of 31 Brucker VII and the plague that afflicted them.

Until now, the *Lancet's* crew had been too busy to stop and piece the data together, to try to see the picture as a whole. But now there was ample time, and the realization of what had been happening here began to dawn on them.

They had followed the well-established principles step by step in studying these incredible people, and nothing had come out as it should. In theory, the steps they had taken should have yielded the answer. They had come to a planet where an entire population was threatened with a dreadful disease. They had identified the disease, found and isolated the virus that caused it, and then developed an antibody that effectively destroyed the virus—in the laboratory. But when they tried to apply the antibody in the afflicted patients, the response had been totally unexpected. They had stopped the march of death among those they had inoculated, and had produced instead a condition that the people seemed to dread far more than death.

"Let's face it," Dal said, "we bungled it somehow. We should have had help here right from the start. I don't know where we went wrong, but we've done something."

"Well, it wasn't your fault," Jack said gloomily. "If we had the right diagnosis, this wouldn't have happened. And I *still* can't see the diagnosis. All I've been able to come up with is a nice mess."

"We're missing something, that's all," Dal said. "The information is all here. We just aren't reading it right, somehow. Somewhere in here is a key to the whole thing, and we just can't see it."

They went back to the data

again, going through it step by step. This was Jack Alvarez's specialty . . . the technique of diagnosis, the ability to take all the available information about a race and about its illness and piece it together into a pattern that made sense. Dal could see that Jack was now bitterly angry with himself, yet at every turn he seemed to strike another obstacle—some fact that didn't jibe, a missing fragment here, a wrong answer there. With Dal and Tiger helping he started back over the sequence of events, trying to make sense out of them, and came up squarely against a blank wall.

And as the doctors sifted through the data, the Bruckian they had brought up from the enclosure sat staring off into space, making small noises with his mouth and moving his arms aimlessly. After a while they led him back to a bunk, gave him a medicine for sleep and left him snoring gently. Another hour passed as they pored over their notes, with Tiger stopping from time to time to mop perspiration from his forehead. All three were aware of the moving clock hands, marking off the minutes that the force screen could hold out.

And then Dal Timgar was digging into the pile of papers, searching frantically for something he could not find. "That first report we got," he said hoarsely. "There was something in the very first information we ever saw on this planet . . ."

"You mean the Confederation's data? It's in the radio log." Tiger pulled open the thick log book. "But what . . ."

"It's there, plain as day, I'm sure of it," Dal said. He read through the report swiftly, until he came to the last paragraph—a two-line description of the largest creatures the original Exploration Ship had found on the planet, described by them as totally unintelligent and only observed on a few occasions in the course of the exploration. Dal read it, and his hands were trembling as he handed the report to Jack. "I knew the answer was there!" he said. "Take a look at that again and think about it for a minute."

Jack read it through. "I don't see what you mean," he said.

"I mean that I think we've made a horrible mistake," Dal said, "and I think I see now what it was. We've had this whole thing exactly one hundred per cent backward from the start, and that explains everything that's happened here!"

Tiger peered over Jack's shoulder at the report. "Backward?"

"As backward as we could get it," Dal said. "We've assumed all along that these creatures down there were calling us for help because of a virus plague that was killing them. All right, look at it the other way. Just suppose that the *virus* was the intelligent creature that called us for help and that those blank-

faced idiots down there are the *real* plague we ought to have been fighting all along . . ."

CHAPTER 11

FOR a moment the others just stared at their Garvian crewmate. Then Jack Alvarez snorted "You'd better go back and get some rest. This has been a tougher grind than I thought. You're beginning to show the strain."

"No, I mean it," Dal said earnestly. "I think that is exactly what's been happening."

Tiger looked at him with concern. "Dal, this is no time for double talk and nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," Dal said. "It's the answer, if you'll only stop and think."

"An intelligent *virus*?" Jack said. "Who ever heard of such a thing? There's never been a life-form like that reported since the beginning of the Galactic exploration."

"But that doesn't mean there couldn't be one," Dal said. "And how would an exploratory crew ever identify it, if it existed? How would they ever even suspect it? They'd miss it completely—unless it happened to get into trouble itself and try to call for help!" Dal jumped up in excitement. "Look, I've seen a dozen articles showing how such a thing was theoretically possible . . . a virus life-form with billions of submicroscopic parts acting together to form an intelligent aggregate. The only thing a

virus-creature would need that we don't need would be some kind of host to live in, some sort of matrix that would allow it to put its intelligence to work."

"It's impossible," Jack said scornfully. "Why don't you give it up and get some rest? Here we sit with our feet in the fire, and all you can do is dream up foolishness like this."

"I'm not so sure it's foolishness," Tiger Martin said slowly. "Jack, maybe he's got something. A couple of things would fit that don't make sense at all."

"All sorts of things would fit," Dal said. "The viruses we know can't survive without some other life-form to live on. They're either parasitic or symbiotic. Suppose these creatures came from some other place, searching for a host that they could live with. Suppose they found a simple-minded and unintelligent creature on this planet and invaded it hoping to set up a symbiotic relationship. The virus would need a host to provide a home and a food supply. Maybe they in turn could supply the intelligence to raise the host to a civilized level of life and performance. Wouldn't that be a fair basis for a sound partnership?"

Jack scratched his head doubtfully. "And you're saying that they came here after the Exploratory Ship had come and gone?"

"They must have! Maybe they only came a few years ago, maybe only months ago. But when they tried invading their new

host, they found out that the host couldn't tolerate them. His body reacted as if they were parasitic invaders, building antibodies against them. And those body defenses were more than the virus could cope with."

Dal pointed to the piles of notes on the desk. "Don't you see how it adds up? Right from the beginning we've been assuming that these creatures we could see down there on this planet were the dominant, intelligent life-forms. Anatomically they were ordinary cellular creatures, and when we examined them we expected to find the same sort of biochemical reactions we'd find with any cellular creatures. Well, all our results came out wrong, because we were dealing with a combination of a cellular creature and a molecular creature—a virus. Maybe these blank-faced idiots were normally that way before the virus came, with the virus in them so weak from antibody attack that the intelligence can't come through. Or maybe the virus was forced to damage some vital part just in order to fight back, and ended up destroying its own host just the way a parasitic virus does."

Jack studied the idea, no longer scornful. "So you think the virus-creatures called for help, hoping we could find some way to free them from the hosts that were killing them. And when Fuzzy developed a powerful antibody against them, and we started using the stuff—" Jack

broke off, shaking his head in horror. "Dal, if you're right, we were literally *slaughtering our own patients* when we gave those injections down there!"

"Exactly," Dal said. "Is it any wonder they're so scared of us now? It must have looked like a deliberate attempt to wipe them out, and now they're afraid that we'll go get help and *really* move in against them."

Tiger nodded. "Which was precisely what we were planning, if you stop to think about it. Maybe that was why they were so reluctant to tell us anything about themselves. Maybe they've already been mistaken for parasitic invaders before, wherever in the Universe they came from."

"But if this is true, then we're really in a jam," Jack said. "What can we possibly do for them? We can't even repair the damage that we've already done. What sort of treatment could we use?"

Dal shook his head. "I don't know the answer to that one, but I do know we've got to find out if we're right. An intelligent virus-creature has as much right to life as any other life-form. If we've guessed right, then there's a lot that our intelligent friends down there haven't told us. Maybe there'll be some clue there. We've just got to face them with it, and see what they say."

Jack looked at the view screen, at the angry mob milling around on the ground, held back from

the ship by the energy screen. "You mean just go out there and say, 'look fellows, it was all a mistake, we didn't really mean to do it?'" He shook his head. "Maybe you want to tell them. Not me!"

"Dal's right, though," Tiger said. "We've got to contact them somehow. They aren't even responding to radio communication, and they've scrambled our outside radio and even fouled our drive mechanism somehow. We've got to settle this while we still have an energy screen."

There was a long silence as the three doctors looked at each other. Then Dal stood up and walked over to the swinging platform. He lifted Fuzzy down onto his shoulder. "It'll be all right," he said to Jack and Tiger. "I'll go out."

"They'll tear you to ribbons!" Tiger protested.

Dal shook his head. "I don't think so," he said quietly. "I don't think they'll touch me. They'll greet me with open arms when I go down there, and they'll be eager to talk with me."

"Are you crazy?" Jack cried, leaping to his feet. "We can't let you go out there."

"Don't worry," Dal said. "I know exactly what I'm doing. I'll be able to handle the situation, believe me."

He hesitated a moment, and gave Fuzzy a last nervous pat, settling him more firmly on his shoulder. Then he started down the corridor for the entrance lock.

He had promised himself long before . . . many years before . . . that he would never do it, but now he knew that there was no alternative. The only other choice was to wait helplessly until the power failed and the protective screen vanished and the creatures on the ground outside tore the ship to pieces.

As he stood in the airlock waiting for the pressure to shift to outside normal, he lifted Fuzzy down into the crook of his arm and rubbed the little creature between the shoe-button eyes. "You've got to back me up now," he whispered softly. "It's been a long time, I know that, but I need help now. It's going to be up to you."

Dal knew the subtle strength of his people's peculiar talent. From the moment he had stepped down to the ground the second time with Tiger and Jack, even with Fuzzy waiting back on the ship, he had felt the powerful wave of horror and fear and anger rising up from the Bruckians, and he had glimpsed the awful idiot vacancy of the minds of the creatures in the enclosure. This had required no effort; it just came naturally into his mind, and he had known instantly that something terrible had gone wrong.

In the years on Hospital Earth, he had carefully forced himself never to think in terms of his special talent. He had diligently screened off the impressions and emotions that struck at him con-

stantly from his classmate and from others that he came in contact with. Above all, he had fought down the temptation to turn his power the other way.

But now, as the lock opened and he started down the ladder, he closed his mind to everything else. Hugging Fuzzy close to his side, he turned his mind into a single tight channel. He drove the thought out at the Bruckians with all the power he could muster: *I come in peace. I mean you no harm. I have good news, joyful news. You must be happy to see me, eager to welcome me . . .*

He could feel the wave of anger and fear strike him like a physical blow as soon as he appeared in the entrance lock. The cries rose up in a wave from, and the crowd surged in toward the ship. With the energy field released, there was nothing to stop them; they were tripping over each other to reach the bottom of the ladder first, shouting threats and waving angry fists, reaching up to grab at Dal's ankles as he came down—

And then as if by magic the cries died in the throats of the ones closest to the ladder. The angry fists unclenched, and extended into outstretched hands to help him down to the ground. As though an ever-widening wave was spreading out around him, the aura of peace and good will struck the people in the crowd. And as it spread, the anger faded from the faces; the hard lines gave way to puzzled frowns, then to smiles. Dal chan-

neled his thoughts more rigidly, and watched the effect spread out from him like ripples in a pond, as anger and suspicion and fear melted away to be replaced by confidence and trust.

Dal had seen it occur a thousand times before. He could remember his trips on Garvian trading ships with his father, when the traders with their fuzzy pink friends on their shoulders faced cold, hostile, suspicious buyers. It had seemed almost miraculous the way the suspicions melted away and the hostile faces became friendly as the buyers' minds became receptive to bargaining and trading. It was no coincidence that throughout the Galaxy the Garvians—always accompanied by their fuzzy friends—had assumed the position of power and wealth and leadership that they had.

And now once again the pattern was being repeated. The Bruckians who surrounded Dal were smiling and talking eagerly; they made no move to touch him or harm him.

The spokesman they had talked to before was there at his elbow, and Dal heard himself saying, "We have found the answer to your problem. We know now the true nature of your race, and the nature of your intelligence. You were afraid that we would find out, but your fears were groundless. We will not turn our knowledge against you. We only want to help you."

An expression almost like de-

spair had crossed the spokesman's face as Dal spoke. He said, "It would be good—if we could believe you. But how can we? We have been driven for so long and come so far, and now you would seek to wipe us out as parasites and disease-carriers . . ."

Dal's hand lay on Fuzzy's tiny body but he felt no quiver, no vibration of fear. He looked across the face of the crowd, trying with all his strength to open his mind to the feelings and emotions of these people. Often enough, with Fuzzy nearby, he had felt the harsh impact of hostile, cruel, brutal minds, even when the owners of those minds had tried to conceal their feelings behind smiles and pleasant words. But here there was no sign of the sickening feeling that kind of mind produced, no hint of hostility or evil.

He shook his head. "Why should we want to destroy you?" he said. "You are good, and peaceful. We know that; why should we harm you? All you want is a place to live, and a host to join with you in a mutually valuable partnership. But you did not tell us everything you could about yourselves, and as a result we have destroyed some of you in our clumsy efforts to learn your true nature."

They talked then, and bit by bit the story came out. The life-form was indeed a virus, unimaginably ancient, and intelligent throughout millions of years of its history. Driven by over-popu-

lation, a pure culture of the virus-creatures had long ago departed from their original native hosts, and traveled like encapsulated spores across space from a distant Galaxy. The trip had been long and exhausting; the virus-creatures had retained only the minimum strength necessary to establish itself in a new host, some unintelligent creature living on an uninhabited planet, a creature that could benefit by the great intelligence of the virus-creatures, and provide food and shelter for both. Finally, after thousands of years of searching, they found this planet with its dull-minded, fruit-gathering inhabitants. These creatures had seemed perfect as hosts, and the virus-creatures had thought their long search for a perfect symbiote was finally at an end.

It was not until they had expended the last dregs of their energy in anchoring themselves into the tissues of their new hosts that they discovered to their horror that the host-creatures could not tolerate them. Unlike their original hosts, the bodies of these creatures began developing deadly antibodies that destroyed virus invaders. In their desperate attempts to hold on and fight back, the virus-creatures had destroyed vital centers in the new host, and one by one they had begun to die. There was not enough energy left for the virus-creatures to detach themselves and move on; without some way to stem the onslaught of the antibodies, they

were doomed to total destruction.

"We were afraid to tell you doctors the truth," the spokesman said. "As we wandered and searched we discovered that creatures like ourselves were extreme rarities in the Universe, that most creatures similar to us were mindless, unintelligent parasites that struck down their hosts and destroyed them. Wherever we went, cellular life-forms regarded us as disease-bearers, and their doctors taught them ways to destroy us. We had hoped that from you we might find a way to save ourselves—and then you unleashed on us the one weapon we could not fight."

"But not maliciously," Dal said. "Only because we did not understand. And now that we do, there may be a way to help. A difficult way, but at least a way. The antibodies themselves can be neutralized, but it may take our biochemists and virologists and all their equipment months or even years to develop and synthesize the proper antidote."

The spokesman looked at Dal, and turned away with a hopeless gesture. "Then it is too late, after all," he said. "We are dying too fast. Even those of us who have not been affected so far are beginning to feel the early symptoms of the antibody attack." He smiled sadly and reached out to stroke the small pink creature perched on Dal's arm. "Your people too have a symbiote, I see. We envy you."

Dal felt a movement on his arm and looked down at Fuzzy. He had always taken his friend for granted, but now he thought of the feeling of emptiness and loss that had come across him when Fuzzy had been almost killed. He had often wondered just what Fuzzy might be like if his almost-fluid, infinitely adaptable physical body had only been endowed with intelligence. He had wondered what kind of a creature Fuzzy might have been if he were able to use his remarkable structure with the guidance of an intelligent mind behind it . . .

He felt another movement on his arm, and his eyes widened as he stared down at his little friend.

A moment before, there had been a single three-inch pink creature on his elbow. But now there were two, each just one-half the size of the original. As Dal watched, one of the two drew away from the other, creeping in to snuggle closer to Dal's side, and a pair of shoe-button eyes appeared and blinked up at him trustingly. But the other creature was moving down his arm, straining out toward the Bruckian spokesman . . .

Dal realized instantly what was happening. He started to draw back, but something stopped him. Deep in his mind he could sense a gentle voice reassuring him, saying, *It's all right, there is nothing to fear, no harm will come to me. These*

creatures need help, and this is the way to help them.

He saw the Bruckian reach out with trembling hand. The tiny pink creature that had separated from Fuzzy seemed almost to leap across to the outstretched hand. And then the spokesman held him close, and the new Fuzzy shivered happily.

The virus-creatures had found a host. Here was the ideal matrix for their intelligence to work with and mold, a host where antibody-formation could be perfectly controlled. Dal knew now that the problem had almost been solved once before, when the virus-creature had reached Fuzzy on the ship; if they had only waited a little longer they would have seen Fuzzy recover from his illness a different creature entirely than before.

Already the new creature was dividing again, with half going on to the next of the Bruckians. To a submicroscopic virus, the body of the host would not have to be large; soon there would be a sufficient number of hosts to serve the virus-creatures' needs forever. As he started back up the ladder to the ship, Dal knew that the problem on 31 Brucker VII had been met with a happy and permanent solution.

Back in the control room Dal related what had happened from beginning to end. There was only one detail that he concealed. He could not bring himself to tell Tiger and Jack of the true na-

ture of his relationship with Fuzzy, of the odd power over the emotions of others that Fuzzy's presence gave him. He could tell by their faces that they realized that he was leaving something out; they had watched him go down to face a blood-thirsty mob, and had seen that mob become docile as lambs as though by magic. Clearly they could not understand what had happened, yet they did not ask him.

"So it was Fuzzy's idea to volunteer as a new host for the creatures," Jack said.

Dal nodded. "I knew that he could reproduce, of course," he said. "Every Garvian has a Fuzzy, and whenever a new Garvian is born, the father's Fuzzy always splits so that half can join the new-born child. It's like the division of a cell; within hours the Fuzzy that stayed down there will have divided to provide enough protoplasm for every one of the surviving intelligent Bruckians."

"And your diagnosis was the right one," Jack said.

"We'll see," Dal said. "Tomorrow we'll know better."

But clearly the problem had been solved. The next day there was an excited conference between the spokesman and the doctors on the *Lancet*. The Bruckians had elected to maintain the same host body as before. They had gotten used to it; with the small pink creatures serving as a shelter to protect them against the deadly antibodies, they could live in peace

and security. But they were eager, before the *Lancet* disembarked, to sign a full Medical Service Contract with the doctors from Hospital Earth. A contract was signed, subject only to final acceptance and ratification by the Council on Contracts.

Now that their radio was free again, the three doctors jubilantly prepared a full account of the problem of 31 Brucker and its solution, and dispatched the news of the new contract to the first relay station on its way back to Hospital Earth. Then, weary to the point of collapse, they retired for the first good sleep in days, eagerly awaiting an official response from Hospital Earth on the completed case and the contract.

"It ought to wipe out any black mark Dr. Tanner has against any of us," Jack said happily. "And especially in Dal's case." He grinned at the Red Doctor. "This one has been yours, all the way. You pulled it out of the fire after I flubbed it completely, and you're going to get the credit, if I have anything to say about it."

"We should all get credit," Dal said. "A new contract isn't signed every day of the year. But the way we all fumbled our way into it, Hospital Earth shouldn't pay much attention to it anyway."

But Dal knew that he was only throwing up his habitual shield to guard against disappointment. Traditionally, a new contract meant a Star rating for each of the crew that brought it in. All

through medical school Dal had read reports of other Patrol Ships that had secured Grade I contracts with uncontracted planets, and he had seen the fanfare and honor that was heaped on the doctors from those ships. And for the first time since he had entered medical school eight years before, Dal now allowed himself to hope that his goal was in sight.

He wanted to be a Star Surgeon more than anything else. It was the one thing that he had wanted and worked for since the cruel days when the plague had swept his homeland, destroying his mother and leaving his father an ailing cripple. And since his assignment aboard the *Lancet*, one thought had filled his mind: to turn in the scarlet collar and cuff in return for the cape and silver star of the full Physician in the Surgical Service. Always before there had been the half-conscious dread that something would happen, that in the end, after all the work, the silver star would still remain just out of reach, that somehow he would never quite get it.

But now there could be no question. Even Black Doctor Tanner could not deny a Grade I contract. The crew of the *Lancet* would be called back to Hospital Earth for a full report on the newly-contacted race, and their days as probationary doctors in the General Practice Patrol would be over.

After they had slept them-

selves out, the doctors prepared the ship for launching, and made their farewells to the Bruckian spokesman.

"When the contract is ratified," Jack said, "a Survey Ship will come here. They will have all of the information that we have gathered, and they will spend many months gathering more. Tell them everything they want to know. Don't conceal anything from them, because once they have completed their survey, any General Practice Patrol Ship in the Galaxy will be able to answer a call for help and have the information they need to serve you."

They delayed launching hour by hour waiting for a response from Hospital Earth, but the radio was silent. They thought of a dozen reasons why the message might have been delayed, but the radio silence continued. Finally they strapped down and lifted the ship from the planet, still waiting for a response.

When it finally came, there was no message of congratulations, nor even any acknowledgment of the new contract. Instead, there was only a terse message:

PROCEED TO REFERENCE POINT
43621 SECTION XIX AND STAND
BY FOR INSPECTION PARTY

Tiger took the message and read it in silence, then handed it to Dal.

"What do they say?" Jack said.

"Read it," Dal said. "They

don't mention the contract, just an inspection party."

"Inspection party! Is that the best they can do for us?"

"They don't sound too enthusiastic," Tiger said. "At least you'd think they could acknowledge receipt of our report."

"It's probably just part of the routine," Dal said. "Maybe they want to confirm our reports from our own records before they commit themselves."

But he knew that he was only whistling in the dark. The moment he saw the terse message, he knew something had gone wrong with the contract. There would be no notes of congratulations, no returning in triumph and honor to Hospital Earth.

Whatever the reason for the inspection party, Dal felt certain who the Inspector was going to be.

It had been exciting to dream, but the scarlet cape and the silver star were still a long way out of reach . . .

CHAPTER 12

IT WAS hours later when their ship reached the contact point coordinates. There had been little talk during the transit; each of them knew already what the other was thinking, and there wasn't much to be said. The message had said it for them.

And Dal's worst fears were realized when the inspection ship appeared, converting from Koen-

ig drive within a few miles of the *Lancet*. He had seen the ship before—a sleek, handsomely outfitted Patrol class ship with the insignia of the Black Service emblazoned on its hull, the private ship of a Four-Star Black Doctor.

But none of them anticipated the action taken by the inspection ship as it drew within lifeboat range of the *Lancet*.

A scooter shot away from its storage rack on the black ship, and a crew of black-garbed technicians piled into the *Lancet's* entrance lock, dressed in the special decontamination suits worn when a ship was returning from a plague spot into uninfected territory.

"What is this?" Tiger demanded as the technicians started unloading decontamination gear into the lock. "What are you doing with that stuff?"

The squad leader looked at him sourly. "You're in quarantine, Doc," he said. "Class I, all precautions, contact with unidentified pestilence. If you don't like it, argue with the Black Doctor, I've just got a job to do."

He started shouting orders to his men, and they scattered throughout the ship, with blowers and disinfectants, driving antiseptic sprays into every crack and cranny of the ship's interior, scouring the hull outside in the rigid pattern prescribed for plague ships. They herded the doctors into the decontamination lock, stripped them of their

clothes, scrubbed them down and tossed them special sterilized fatigues to wear with masks and gloves.

"This is idiotic," Jack protested. "We aren't carrying any dangerous organisms!"

The squad leader shrugged indifferently. "Tell it to the Black Doctor, not me. All I know is that this ship is under quarantine until it's officially released, and from what I hear, it's not going to be released for quite some time."

At last the job was done, and the scooter departed back to the inspection ship. A few moments later they saw it returning, this time carrying just three men. In addition to the pilot and one technician, there was a single passenger: a portly figure dressed in a black robe, horn-rimmed glasses and cowl.

The scooter grappled the *Lancet's* side, and Black Doctor Hugo Tanner climbed wheezing into the entrance lock, followed by the technician. He stopped halfway into the lock to get his breath, and paused again as the lock swung closed behind him. Dal was shocked at the physical change in the man in the few short weeks since he had seen him last. The Black Doctor's face was gray; every effort of movement brought on paroxysms of coughing. He looked sick, and he looked tired, yet his jaw was still set in angry determination.

The doctors stood at attention as he stepped into the control room, hardly able to conceal their

surprise at seeing him. "Well?" the Black Doctor snapped at them. "What's the trouble with you? You act like you've seen a ghost or something."

"We—we'd heard that you were in the hospital, sir."

"Did you, now!" the Black Doctor snorted. "Hospital! Bah! I had to tell the press something to get the hounds off me for a while. These young puppies seem to think that a Black Doctor can just walk away from his duties any time he chooses to undergo their fancy surgical procedures. And you know who has been screaming the loudest to get their hands on me? The Surgical Service, that's who!"

The Black Doctor glared at Dal Timgar. "Well, I dare say the Surgical Service will have their chance at me, all in good time. But first there are certain things which must be taken care of." He looked up at the attendant. "You're quite certain that the ship has been decontaminated?"

The attendant nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And the crewmen?"

"It's safe to talk to them, sir, as long as you avoid physical contact."

The Black Doctor grunted and wheezed and settled himself down in a seat. "All right now, gentlemen," he said to the three, "let's have your story of this affair in the Brucker system, right from the start."

"But we sent in a full report," Tiger said.

"I'm aware of that, you idiot.

I have waded through your report, all thirty-five pages of it, and I only wish you hadn't been so long-winded. Now I want to hear what happened directly from you. Well?"

The three doctors looked at each other. Then Jack began the story, starting with the first hesitant "greeting" that had come through to them. He told everything that had happened without embellishments: their first analysis of the nature of the problem, the biochemical and medical survey that they ran on the afflicted people, his own failure to make the diagnosis, the incident of Fuzzy's sudden affliction, and the strange solution that had finally come from it. As he talked the Black Doctor sat back with his eyes half closed, his face blank, listening and nodding from time to time as the story proceeded.

And Jack was carefully honest and fair in his account. "We were all of us lost, until Dal Timgar saw the significance of what had happened to Fuzzy," he said. "His idea of putting the creature through the filter gave us our first specimen of the isolated virus, and showed us how to obtain the antibody. Then after we saw what happened with our initial series of injections, we were really at sea, and by then we couldn't reach a Hospital Ship for help of any kind." He went on to relate Dal's idea that the virus itself might be the intelligent creature, and recounted the

things that happened after Dal went down to talk to the spokesman again with Fuzzy on his shoulder.

Through it all the Black Doctor listened sourly, glancing occasionally at Dal and saying nothing. "So is that all?" he said when Jack had finished.

"Not quite," Jack said. "I want it to be on the record that it was my failure in diagnosis that got us into trouble. I don't want any misunderstanding about that. If I'd had the wit to think beyond the end of my nose, there wouldn't have been any problem."

"I see," the Black Doctor said. He pointed to Dal. "So it was this one who really came up with the answers and directed the whole program on this problem, is that right?"

"That's right," Jack said firmly. "He should get all the credit for it."

Something stirred in Dal's mind and he felt Fuzzy snuggling in tightly to his side. He could feel the cold hostility in the Black Doctor's mind, and he started to say something, but the Black Doctor cut him off. "Do you agree to that also, Dr. Martin?" he asked Tiger.

"I certainly do," Tiger said. "I'll back up the Blue Doctor right down the line."

The Black Doctor smiled unpleasantly and nodded. "Well, I'm certainly happy to hear you say that, gentlemen. I might say that it is a very great relief to me to hear it from your own tes-

timony. Because this time there shouldn't be any argument from either of you as to just where the responsibility lies, and I'm relieved to know that I can completely exonerate you two, at any rate."

Jack Alvarez's jaw went slack and he stared at the Black Doctor as though he hadn't heard him properly. "Exonerate us?" he said. "Exonerate us from what?"

"From the charges of incompetence, malpractice and conduct unbecoming to a Physician which I am lodging against your colleague in the Red Service here," the Black Doctor said angrily. "Of course, I was confident that neither of you two could have contributed very much to this bungling mess, but it is reassuring to have your own statements of that fact on the record. They should carry more weight in a Council hearing than any plea I might make in your behalf."

"But—but what do you mean by a Council hearing?" Tiger stammered. "I don't understand you! This — this problem is *solved*. We solved it as a Patrol team, all of us. We sent in a brand new Medical Service Contract from those people . . ."

"Oh, yes. *That!*" The Black Doctor drew a long pink dispatch sheet from an inner pocket and opened it out. The doctors could see the photo reproductions of their signatures at the bottom. "Fortunately—for you two—this bit of nonsense was brought to my attention at the first relay

station that received it. I personally accepted it and withdrew it from the circuit before it could reach Hospital Earth for filing."

Slowly, as they watched him, he ripped the pink dispatch sheet into a dozen pieces and tossed it into the disposal vent. "So much for that," he said slowly. "I can choose to overlook your foolishness in trying to cloud the important issues with a so-called 'contract' to divert attention, but I'm afraid I can't pay much attention to it, nor allow it to appear in the general report. And of course I am forced to classify the *Lancet* as a Plague Ship until a bacteriological and virological examination has been completed on both ship and crew. The planet itself will be considered a Galactic plague spot until proper measures have been taken to insure its decontamination."

The Black Doctor drew some papers from another pocket and turned to Dal Timgar. "As for you, the charges are clear enough. You have broken the most fundamental rules of good judgment and good medicine in handling the 31 Brucker affair. You have permitted a General Practice Patrol Ship to approach a potentially dangerous plague spot without any notification of higher authorities. You have undertaken a biochemical and medical survey for which you had neither the proper equipment nor the training qualifications, and you exposed your ship and your crewmates to an incredible risk in landing on such

a planet. You are responsible for untold—possibly fatal—damage to over two hundred individuals of the race that called on you for help. You have even subjected the symbiotic creature that depends upon your own race for life and support to virtual slavery and possible destruction; and finally, you had the audacity to try to cover up your bungling with claims of arranging a Grade I contract with an uninvestigated race."

The Black Doctor broke off as an attendant came in the door and whispered something in his ear. Doctor Tanner shook his head angrily, "I can't be bothered now!"

"They say it's urgent, sir."

"Yes, it's always urgent." The Black Doctor heaved to his feet. "If it weren't for this miserable incompetent here, I wouldn't have to be taking precious time away from my more important duties." He scowled at the *Lancet* crewmen. "You will excuse me for a moment," he said, and disappeared into the communications room.

The moment he was gone from the room, Jack and Tiger were talking at once. "He couldn't really be serious," Tiger said. "It's impossible! Not one of those charges would hold up under investigation."

"Well, I think it's a frame-up," Jack said, his voice tight with anger. "I knew that some people on Hospital Earth were out to get you, but I don't see how

a Four-Star Black Doctor could be party to such a thing. Either someone has been misinforming him, or he just doesn't understand what happened . . ."

Dal shook his head. "He understands, all right, and he's the one who's determined to get me out of the Service. This is a flimsy excuse, but he has to use it, because it's now or never. He knows that if we bring in a Contract with a new planet, and it's formally ratified, we'll all get our Stars and he'd never be able to block me again. And Black Doctor Tanner is going to be certain that I don't get that Star, or die trying."

"But this is completely unfair," Jack protested. "He's turning our own words against you! You can bet that he'll have a survey crew down on that planet in no time, bringing home a contract just the same as the one we wrote, and there won't be any questions asked about it."

"Except that I'll be out of the Service," Dal said. "Don't worry. You'll get the credit in the long run. When all the dust settles, he'll be sure that you two are named as agents for the contract. He doesn't want to hurt you, it's me that he's out to get, one way or another."

"Well, he won't get away with it," Tiger said. "We can see to that. Its not too late to retract our stories. If he thinks he can get rid of you with something that wasn't your fault, he's going to find out that he has to

get rid of a lot more than just you."

But Dal was shaking his head. "Not this time, Tiger. This time you keep out of it."

"What do you mean, keep out of it?" Tiger cried. "Do you think I'm going to stand by quietly and watch him cut you down?"

"That's exactly what you're going to do," Dal said sharply. "I meant what I said. I want you to keep your mouth shut. Don't say anything more at all, just let it be."

"But I can't stand by and do nothing! When a friend of mine needs help . . ."

"Can't you get it through your thick skull that this time I don't want your help?" Dal said. "Do me a favor this time. *Leave me alone*. Don't stick your thumb in the pie."

Tiger just stared at the little Garvian. "Look, Dal, all I'm trying to do . . ."

"I know what you're trying to do," Dal snapped, "and I don't want any part of it. I don't need your help, I don't *want* it. Why do you have to force it down my throat?"

There was a long silence. Then Tiger spread his hands helplessly. "Okay," he said, "if that's the way you want it." He turned away from Dal, his big shoulders slumping. "I've only been trying to make up for some of the dirty breaks you've been handed since you came to Hospital Earth."

"I know that," Dal said, "and I've appreciated it. Sometimes

it's been the only thing that's kept me going. But that doesn't mean that you own me. Friendship is one thing; proprietorship is something else. I'm not your private property."

He saw the look on Tiger's face, as though he had suddenly turned and slapped him viciously across the face. "Look, I know it sounds awful, but I can't help it. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to change things with us, but *I'm a person just like you are*. I can't go on leaning on you any longer. Everybody has to stand on his own somewhere along the line. You do, and I do, too. And that goes for Jack, too."

They heard the door to the communications shack open, and the Black Doctor was back in the room. "Well?" he said. "Am I interrupting something?" He glanced sharply at the tight-lipped doctors. "The call was from the Survey Section," he went on blandly. "A survey crew is on its way to 31 Brucker to start gathering some useful information on the situation. But that is neither here nor there. You have heard the charges against the Red Doctor here. Is there anything any of you want to say about the matter?"

Tiger and Jack looked at each other. The silence in the room was profound.

The Black Doctor turned to Dal. "And what about you?"

"I have something to say, but I'd like to talk to you alone."

"As you wish. You two will

return to your quarters and stay there."

"The attendant, too," Dal said.

The Black Doctor's eyes glinted and met Dal's for a moment. Then he shrugged and nodded to his attendant. "Step outside, please. We have a private matter to discuss."

The Black Doctor turned his attention to the papers on the desk as Dal stood before him with Fuzzy sitting in the crook of his arm. From the moment that the notice of the inspection ship's approach had come to the *Lancet*, Dal had known what was coming. He had been certain what the purpose of the detainment was, and who the inspector would be, yet he had not really been worried. In the back of his mind, a small, comfortable thought had been sustaining him.

It didn't really matter how hostile or angry Black Doctor Tanner might be; he knew that in a last-ditch stand there was one way the Black Doctor could be handled.

He remembered the dramatic shift from hostility to friendliness among the Bruckians when he had come down from the ship with Fuzzy on his shoulder. Before then, he had never considered using his curious power to protect himself and gain an end; but since then, without even consciously bringing it to mind, he had known that the next time would be easier. If it ever came to a show-down with Black Doctor Tanner, a trap from which

he couldn't free himself, there was still this way. *The Black Doctor would never know what happened*, he thought, *It would just seem to him, suddenly, that he had been looking at things the wrong way. No one would ever know . . .*

But he knew, even as the thought came to his mind, that this was not so. Now, face to face with the show-down, he knew that it was no good. One person would know what had happened: himself. On 31 Brucker, he had convinced himself that the end justified the means; here it was different.

For a moment, as Black Doctor Tanner stared up at him through the horn-rimmed glasses, Dal wavered. Why should he hesitate to protect himself? he thought angrily. This attack against him was false and unfair, trumped up for the sole purpose of destroying his hopes and driving him out of the Service. Why shouldn't he grasp at any means, fair or unfair, to fight it?

But he could hear the echo of Black Doctor Arnquist's words in his mind: *I beg of you not to use it. No matter what happens, don't use it.* Doctor Arnquist would never know, for sure, that he had broken faith . . . but he would know . . .

"Well," Black Doctor Tanner was saying, "speak up. I can't waste much more time dealing with you. If you have something to say, say it."

Dal sighed. He lifted Fuzzy

down and slipped him gently into his jacket pocket. "These charges against me are not true," he said.

The Black Doctor shrugged. "Your own crewmates support them with their statements."

"That's not the point. They're not true, and you know it as well as I do. You deliberately rigged them up to build a case against me."

The Black Doctor's face turned dark and his hands clenched on the papers on the desk. "Are you suggesting that I have nothing better to do than to rig false charges against one probationer out of seventy-five thousand traveling the Galaxy?"

"I'm suggesting that we are alone here," Dal said. "Nobody else is listening. Just for once, right now, we can be honest. We both know what you're trying to do to me. I'd just like to hear you admit it once."

The Black Doctor slammed his fist down on the table. "I don't have to listen to insolence like this," he roared.

"Yes, you do," Dal said. "Just this once. Then I'll be through." Suddenly Dal's words were tumbling out of control, and his whole body was trembling with anger. "You have been determined from the very beginning that I should never finish the medical training that I started. You've tried to block me time after time, in every way you could think of. You've almost succeeded, but never quite made

it until this time. But now you *have* to make it. If that contract were to go through I'd get my Star, and you'd never again be able to do anything about it. So it's now or never if you're going to break me."

"Nonsense!" the Black Doctor stormed. "I wouldn't lower myself to meddle with your kind. The charges stand up for themselves."

"Not if you look at them carefully. You claim I failed to notify Hospital Earth that we had entered a plague area—but our records of our contact with the planet prove that we did only what any Patrol Ship would have done when the call came in. We didn't have enough information to know that there was a plague there, and when we finally did know the truth we could no longer make contact with Hospital Earth. You claim that I brought harm to two hundred of the natives there, yet if you study our notes and records, you will see that our errors there were unavoidable. We couldn't have done anything else under the circumstances, and if we hadn't done what we did, we would have been ignoring the basic principles of diagnosis and treatment which we've been taught. And your charges don't mention that by possibly harming two hundred of the Bruckians, we found a way to save two million of them from absolute destruction."

The Black Doctor glared at

him. "The charges will stand up, I'll see to that."

"Oh, I'm sure you will! You can ram them through and make them stick before anybody ever has a chance to examine them carefully. You have the power to do it. And by the time an impartial judge could review all the records, your Survey Ship will have been there and gathered so much more data and muddled up the field so thoroughly that no one will ever be certain that the charges aren't true. But you and I know that they wouldn't really hold up under inspection. We know that they're false right down the line and that you're the one who is responsible for them."

The Black Doctor grew darker, and he trembled with rage as he drew himself to his feet. Dal could feel his hatred almost like a physical blow and his voice was almost a shriek.

"All right," he said, "if you insist, then the charges are lies, made up specifically to break you, and I'm going to push them through if I have to jeopardize my reputation. You could have bowed out gracefully at any time along the way and saved yourself dishonor and disgrace, but you wouldn't do it. Now, I'm going to force you to. I've worked my lifetime long to build the reputation of Hospital Earth and of the Earthmen that go out to all the planets as representatives. I've worked to make the Confederation respect Hospital Earth and the Earthmen who are her doctors. You don't belong here

with us. You forced yourself in, you aren't an Earthman and you don't have the means or resources to be a doctor from Hospital Earth. If you succeed, a thousand others will follow in your footsteps, chipping away at the reputation that we have worked to build, and I'm not going to allow one incompetent alien bungler pretending to be a surgeon to walk in and destroy the thing I've spent my life fighting to build—"

The Black Doctor's voice had grown shrill, almost out of control. But now suddenly he broke off, his mouth still working, and his face went deathly white. The finger he was pointing at Dal wavered and fell. He clutched at his chest, his breath coming in great gasps and staggered back into the chair. "Something's happened," his voice croaked, "I can't breathe."

Dal stared at him in horror for a moment, then leaped across the room and jammed his thumb against the alarm bell.

CHAPTER 13

RED Doctor Dal Timgar knew at once that there would be no problem in diagnosis here. The Black Doctor slumped back in his seat, gasping for air, his face twisted in pain as he labored just to keep on breathing. Tiger and Jack burst into the room, and Dal could tell that they knew instantly what had happened.

"Coronary," Jack said grimly.

Dal nodded. "The question is, just how bad."

"Get the cardiograph in here. We'll soon see."

But the electrocardiograph was not needed to diagnose the nature of the trouble. All three doctors had seen the picture often enough—the sudden, massive blockage of circulation to the heart that was so common to creatures with central circulatory pumps, the sort of catastrophic accident which could cause irreparable crippling or sudden death within a matter of minutes.

Tiger injected some medicine to ease the pain, and started oxygen to help the labored breathing, but the old man's color did not improve. He was too weak to talk; he just lay helplessly gasping for air as they lifted him up onto a bed. Then Jack took an electrocardiograph tracing and shook his head.

"We'd better get word back to Hospital Earth, and fast," he said quietly. "He just waited a little too long for that cardiac transplant, that's all. This is a bad one. Tell them we need a surgeon out here just as fast as they can move, or the Black Service is going to have a dead Physician on its hands."

There was a sound across the room, and the Black Doctor motioned feebly to Tiger. "The tracing," he gasped. "Let me see it."

"There's nothing for you to see," Tiger said. "You mustn't do anything to excite yourself."

"Let me see it." Dr. Tanner took the thin strip of paper and ran it quickly through his fingers. Then he dropped it on the bed and lay his head back hopelessly. "Too late," he said, so softly they could hardly hear him. "Too late for help now."

Tiger checked his blood pressure and listened to his heart. "It will only take a few hours to get help," he said. "You rest and sleep now. There's plenty of time."

He joined Dal and Jack in the corridor. "I'm afraid he's right, this time," he said. "The damage is severe, and he hasn't the strength to hold out very long. He might last long enough for a surgeon and operating team to get here, but I doubt it. We'd better get the word off."

A few moments later he put the earphones aside. "It'll take six hours for the nearest help to get here," he said. "Maybe five and a half if they really crowd it. But when they got a look at that cardiogram they just threw up their hands. He's got to have a transplant, nothing less, and even if we can keep him alive until a surgical team gets here the odds are a thousand to one against his surviving the surgery."

"Well, he's been asking for it," Jack said. "They've been trying to get him into the hospital for a cardiac transplant for years. Everybody's known that one of those towering rages would get him sooner or later."

"Maybe he'll hold on better

than we think," Dal said. "Let's watch and wait."

But the Black Doctor was not doing well. Moment by moment he grew weaker, laboring harder for air as his blood pressure crept slowly down. Half an hour later the pain had returned; Tiger took another tracing while Dal checked his venous pressure and shock level.

As he finished, Dal felt the Black Doctor's eyes on him. "It's going to be all right," he said. "There'll be time for help to come."

Feebly the Black Doctor shook his head. "No time," he said. "Can't wait that long." Dal could see the fear in the old man's eyes. His lips began to move again as though there were something more he wanted to say; but then his face hardened, and he turned his head away helplessly.

Dal walked around the bed and looked down at the tracing, comparing it with the first one that was taken. "What do you think, Tiger?"

"It's no good. He'll never make it for five more hours."

"What about right now?"

Tiger shook his head. "It's a terrible surgical risk."

"But every minute of waiting makes it worse, right?"

"That's right."

"Then I think we'll stop waiting," Dal said. "We have a prosthetic heart in condition for use, don't we?"

"Of course."

"Good. Get it ready now." It seemed as though someone else was talking. "You'll have to be first assistant, Tiger. We'll get him into the heart-lung machine, and if we don't have help available by then, we'll have to try to complete the transplant. Jack, you'll give anaesthesia, and it will be a tricky job. Try to use local blocks as much as you can, and have the heart-lung machine ready well in advance. We'll only have a few seconds to make the shift. Now let's get moving."

Tiger stared at him. "Are you sure that you want to do this?"

"I never wanted anything less in my life," Dal said fervently. "But do you think he can survive until a Hospital Ship arrives?"

"No."

"Then it seems to me that I don't have any choice. You two don't need to worry. This is a surgical problem now, and I'll take full responsibility."

The Black Doctor was watching him, and Dal knew he had heard the conversation. Now the old man lay helplessly as they moved about getting the surgical room into preparation. Jack prepared the anaesthetics, checked and rechecked the complex heart-lung machine which could artificially support circulation and respiration at the time that the damaged heart was separated from its great vessels. The transplant "prosthetic" heart had been grown in the laboratories on Hospital Earth from embryonic tissue; Tiger remov-

ed it from the frozen specimen locker and brought it to normal body temperature in the special warm saline bath designed for the purpose.

Throughout the preparations the Black Doctor lay watching, still conscious enough to recognize what was going on, attempting from time to time to shake his head in protest but not quite succeeding. Finally Dal came to the bedside. "Don't be afraid," he said gently to the old man. "It isn't safe to try to delay until the ship from Hospital Earth can get here. Every minute we wait is counting against you. I think I can manage the transplant if I start now. I know you don't like it, but I am the Red Doctor in authority on this ship. If I have to order you, I will."

The Black Doctor lay silently for a moment, staring at Dal. Then the fear seemed to fade from his face, and the anger disappeared. With a great effort he moved his head to nod. "All right, son," he said softly. "Do the best you know how."

Dal knew from the moment he made the decision to go ahead that the thing he was undertaking was all but hopeless.

There was little or no talk as the three doctors worked at the operating table. The overhead light in the ship's tiny surgery glowed brightly; the only sound in the room was the wheeze of the anaesthesia apparatus, the snap of clamps and the doctors' own quiet breathing as they

worked desperately against time.

Dal felt as if he were in a dream, working like an automaton, going through mechanical motions that seemed completely unrelated to the living patient that lay on the operating table. In his training he had assisted at hundreds of organ transplant operations; he himself had done dozens of cardiac transplants, with experienced surgeons assisting and guiding him until the steps of the procedure had become almost second nature. On Hospital Earth, with the unparalleled medical facilities available there, and with well-trained teams of doctors, anaesthetists and nurses the technique of replacing an old worn-out damaged heart with a new and healthy one had become commonplace. It posed no more threat to a patient than a simple appendectomy had posed three centuries before.

But here in the Patrol ship's operating room under emergency conditions there seemed little hope of success. Already the Black Doctor had suffered violent shock from the damage that had occurred in his heart. Already he was clinging to life by a fragile thread; the additional shock of the surgery, of the anaesthesia and the necessary conversion to the heart-lung machine while the delicate tissues of the new heart were fitted and sutured into place vessel by vessel was more than any pa-

tient could be expected to survive.

Yet Dal had known when he saw the second cardiogram that the attempt would have to be made. Now he worked swiftly, his frail body engulfed in the voluminous surgical gown, his thin fingers working carefully with the polished instruments. Speed and skill were all that could save the Black Doctor now, to offer him the one chance in a thousand that he had for survival.

But the speed and skill had to be Dal's. Dal knew that, and the knowledge was like a lead weight strapped to his shoulders. If Black Doctor Hugo Tanner was fighting for his life now, Dal knew that he too was fighting for his life—the only kind of life that he wanted, the life of a Physician.

Black Doctor Tanner's antagonism to him as an alien, as an incompetent, as one who was unworthy to wear the collar and cuff of a Physician from Hospital Earth, was common knowledge. Dal realized with perfect clarity that if he failed now, his career as a Physician would be over; no one, not even himself, would ever be entirely certain that he had not somehow, in some dim corner of his mind, allowed himself to fail.

Yet if he had not made the attempt and the Black Doctor had died before help had come, there would always be those who would accuse him of delaying on purpose . . .

His mouth was dry; he longed for a drink of water, even though he knew that no water could quench this kind of thirst. His fingers grew numb as he worked, and moment by moment the sense of utter hopelessness grew stronger in his mind. Tiger worked stolidly across the table from him, inexperienced help at best because of the sketchy surgical training he had had. Even his solid presence in support here did not lighten the burden for Dal. There was nothing that Tiger could do or say that would help things or change things now. Even Fuzzy, waiting alone on his perch in the Control Room, could not help him now. Nothing could help now but his own individual skill as a surgeon, and his bitter determination that he must not and would not fail.

But his fingers faltered as a thousand questions welled up in his mind. Was he doing this right? This vessel here . . . clamp it and tie it? Or dissect it out and try to preserve it? This nerve plexus . . . which one was it? How important? How were the blood pressure and respirations doing? Was the Black Doctor holding his own under the assault of the surgery?

The more Dal tried to hurry, the more he seemed to be wading through waist-deep mud, unable to make his fingers do what he wanted them to do. How could he save ten seconds, twenty seconds, a half a minute? That half a minute might make

the difference between success or failure, yet the seconds ticked by swiftly and the procedure was going slowly.

Too slowly. He reached a point where he thought he could not go on. His mind was searching desperately for help—any kind of help, something to lean on, something to brace him and give him support. And then quite suddenly he understood something clearly that had been nibbling at the corners of his mind for a long time. It was as if someone had snapped on a floodlight in a darkened room, and he saw something he had never seen before.

He saw that from the first day he had stepped down from the Garvian ship that had brought him to Hospital Earth to begin his medical training, he had been relying upon crutches to help him.

Black Doctor Arnquist had been a crutch upon whom he could lean. Tiger, for all his clumsy good-heartedness and for all the help and protection he had offered, had been a crutch. Fuzzy, who had been by his side since the day he was born, was still another kind of crutch to fall back on, a way out, a port of haven in the storm. They were crutches, every one, and he had leaned on them heavily.

But now there was no crutch to lean on. He had a quick mind with good training. He had two nimble hands that knew their job, and two legs that were cap-

able of supporting his weight, frail as they were. He knew now that he had to stand on them squarely, for the first time in his life.

And suddenly he realized that this was as it should be. It seemed so clear, so obvious and unmistakable that he wondered how he could have failed to recognize it for so long. If he could not depend on himself, then Black Doctor Hugo Tanner would have been right all along. If he could not do this job that was before him on his own strength, standing on his own two legs without crutches to lean on, how could he claim to be a competent Physician from Hospital Earth? What right did he have to the goal he sought if he had to earn it on the strength of the help of others? It was *he* who wanted to be a Star Surgeon—not Fuzzy, not Tiger, nor anyone else.

He felt his heart thudding in his chest, and he saw the operation before him as if he were standing in an amphitheater peering down over some other surgeon's shoulder. Suddenly everything else was gone from his mind but the immediate task at hand. His fingers began to move more swiftly, with a confidence he had never felt before. The decisions to be made arose, and he made them without hesitation, and knew as he made them that they were right.

And for the first time the procedure began to move. He mur-

mured instructions to Jack from time to time, and placed Tiger's clumsy hands in the places he wanted them for retraction. "Not there, back a little," he said. "That's right. Now hold this clamp and release it slowly while I tie, then reclamp it. Slowly now . . . that's the way! Jack, check that pressure again."

It seemed as though someone else were doing the surgery, directing his hands step by step in the critical work that had needed to be done. Dal placed the connections to the heart-lung machine perfectly, and moved with new swiftness and confidence as the great blood vessels were clamped off and the damaged heart removed. A quick check of vital signs, chemistries, oxygenation, a sharp instruction to Jack, a caution to Tiger, and the new prosthetic heart was in place. He worked now with painstaking care, manipulating the micro-sutures that would secure the new vessels to the old so firmly that they were almost indistinguishable from a healed wound, and he knew that it was going *right* now, that whether the patient ultimately survived or not, he had made the right decision and had carried it through with all the skill at his command.

And then the heart-lung machine fell silent again, and the carefully-applied nodal stimulator flicked on and off, and slowly, at first hesitantly, then firmly and vigorously, the new heart began its endless pumping chore.

The black Doctor's blood pressure moved up to a healthy level and stabilized; the grey flesh of his face slowly became suffused with a healthy pink. It was over, and Dal was walking out of the surgery, his hands trembling so violently that he could hardly get his gown off. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, and he could see the silent pride in the others' faces as they joined him in the dressing room to change clothes.

He knew then that no matter what happened he had vindicated himself. Half an hour later, back in the sickbay, the Black Doctor was awake, breathing slowly and easily without need of supplemental oxygen. Only the fine sweat standing out on his forehead gave indication of the ordeal he had been through.

Swiftly and clinically Dal checked the vital signs as the old man watched him. He was about to turn the pressure cuff over to Jack and leave when the Black Doctor said, "Wait."

Dal turned to him. "Yes, sir?"

"You did it?" the Black Doctor said softly.

"Yes, sir."

"It's finished? The transplant is done?"

"Yes," Dal said. "It went well, and you can rest now. You were a good patient."

For the first time Dal saw a smile cross the old man's face. "A foolish patient, perhaps," he said, so softly that no one but Dal could hear, "but not so foolish now, not so foolish that I

cannot recognize a good doctor when I see one . . ."

And with a smile he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 14

IT WAS amazing to Dal Timgar just how good it seemed to be back on Hospital Earth again.

In the time he had been away as a crewman of the *Lancet*, the seasons had changed, and the Port of Philadelphia lay under the steaming summer sun. As Dal stepped off the shuttle ship to join the hurrying crowds in the great spaceport, it seemed almost as though he were coming home.

He thought for a moment of the night not so long before when he had waited here for the shuttle to Hospital Seattle, to attend the meeting of the Medical Training Council. He had worn no uniform then, not even the collar and cuff of the Probationary Physician, and he remembered his despair that night when he had thought that his career as a Physician from Hospital Earth was at an end.

Now he was returning by shuttle from Hospital Seattle to the Port of Philadelphia, completing the cycle that had been started many months before. But things were different now. The scarlet cape of the Surgical Service hung from his slender shoulders now, and the light of the station room caught the polished silver emblem on his collar. It was a

tiny bit of metal, but its significance was enormous. It announced to the world Dal Timgar's final and permanent acceptance as a Physician; but more, it symbolized the far-reaching distances he had already traveled, and would travel again, in the service of Hospital Earth.

It was the silver star of the Star Surgeon.

The week just past had been both exciting and confusing. The Hospital Ship had arrived less than an hour after Black Doctor Hugo Tanner had recovered from his anaesthesia, moving in on the *Lancet* in frantic haste and starting the shipment of special surgical supplies, anaesthetics and maintenance equipment across in lifeboats almost before contact had been stabilized. A large passenger boat hurtled away from the Hospital Ship's side, carrying a pair of Four-Star Surgeons, half a dozen Three-Star Surgeons, two Radiologists, two Internists, a dozen nurses and another Four-Star Black Doctor across to the *Lancet*; and when they arrived at the Patrol Ship's entrance lock, they discovered that their haste had been in vain.

It was like Grand Rounds in the general wards of Hospital Philadelphia, with the Four-Star Surgeons in the lead as they tramped aboard the Patrol Ship. They found Black Doctor Tanner sitting quietly at his bedside reading a Journal of Pathology and taking notes. He glared up

at them when they burst in the door without even knocking.

"But are you feeling well, sir?" the Chief Surgeon asked him for the third time.

"Of course I'm feeling well. Do you thing I'd be sitting here if I weren't?" the Black Doctor growled. "Dr. Timgar is my surgeon and the Physician in charge of this case. Talk to him. He can give you all the details of the matter."

"You mean you permitted a Probationary Physician to perform this kind of surgery?" the Four-Star Surgeon cried incredulously.

"I did not!" the Black Doctor snapped. "He had to drag me kicking and screaming into the operating room. But fortunately for me, this particular Probationary Physician had the courage of his convictions, as well as wit enough to realize that I would not survive if he waited for you to gather your army together. But I think you will find the surgery was handled with excellent skill. Again, I must refer you to Dr. Timgar for the details. I was not paying attention to the technique of the surgery, I assure you."

"But sir," the Chief Surgeon broke in, "how could there have been surgery of any sort here? The dispatch that came to us listed the *Lancet* as a Plague Ship . . ."

"*Plague Ship!*" the Black Doctor exploded. "Oh, yes. Egad! I . . . hum! . . . imagine that the dispatcher must have gotten his

signals mixed somehow. Well, I suppose you want to examine me. Let's have it over with."

The doctors examined him within an inch of his life. They exhausted every means of physical, laboratory and radiological examination short of re-opening his chest and looking in, and at last the Chief Surgeon was forced reluctantly to admit that there was nothing left for him to do but provide post-operative followup care for the irascible old man.

And by the time the examination was over and the Black Doctor was moved aboard the Hospital Ship, word had come through official channels to the *Lancet* announcing that the quarantine order had been a dispatcher's unfortunate error, and directing the ship to return at once to Hospital Earth with the new Contract that had been signed on 31 Brucker VII. The crewmen of the *Lancet* had special orders to report immediately to the Medical Training Council at Hospital Seattle upon arrival, in order to give their formal General Practice Patrol reports and to receive their appointments respectively as Star Physician, Star Diagnostician and Star Surgeon. The orders were signed with the personal mark of Hugo Tanner, Physician of the Black Service.

Now the ceremony and celebration in Hospital Seattle were over, and Dal had another appointment to keep. He lifted Fuzzy from his elbow and tucked

him safely into an inner jacket pocket to protect him from the crowd in the station, and moved swiftly through to the subway tubes.

He had expected to see Black Doctor Arnquist at the investment ceremonies, but there had been neither sign nor word from him. Dal tried to reach him after the ceremonies were over; all he could learn was that the Black Doctor was unavailable. And then a message had come through to Dal under the official Hospital Earth Headquarters priority, requesting him to present himself at once at the Grand Council Building at Hospital Philadelphia for an interview of the utmost importance.

He followed the directions on the dispatch now, and reached the Grand Council Building well ahead of the appointed time. He followed corridors and rode elevators until he reached the 22nd story office suite where he had been directed to report. The whole building seemed alive with bustle, as though something of enormous importance was going on; high-ranking Physicians of all the services were hurrying about, gathering in little groups at the elevators and talking among themselves in hushed voices. Even more strange, Dal saw delegation after delegation of alien creatures moving through the building, some in the special atmosphere maintaining devices necessary for their survival on Earth, some characteristically alone and unaccompan-

ied, others in the company of great retinues of underlings. Dal paused in the main concourse of the building as he saw two such delegations arrive by special car from the Port of Philadelphia.

"Odd," he said quietly, reaching into stroke Fuzzy's head. "Quite a gathering of the clans, eh? What do you think? Last time I saw a gathering like this was back at home during one of the centennial conclaves of the Galactic Confederation."

On the 22nd floor, a secretary ushered him into an inner office. There he found Black Doctor Thorvold Arnquist, in busy conference with a Blue Doctor, a Green Doctor and a Surgeon. The Black Doctor looked up, and beamed. "That will be all right now, gentlemen," he said. "I'll be in touch with you directly."

He waited until the others had departed. Then he crossed the room and practically hugged Dal in delight. "It's good to see you, boy," he said, "and above all, it's good to see those silver stars at last. You and your little pink friend have done a good job, a far better job than I thought you would do, I must admit."

Dal perched Fuzzy on his shoulder. "But what is this about an interview? Why did you want to see me, and what are all these people doing here?"

Dr. Arnquist laughed. "Don't worry," he said. "You won't have to stay for the Council Meeting. It will be a long boring session, I fear. Doubtless every single

one of these delegates at some time in the next few days will be standing up to give us a three hour oration, and it is my ill fortune as a Four-Star Black Doctor to have to sit and listen and smile through it all. But in the end, it will be worth it, and I thought that you should at least know that your name will be mentioned many times during these sessions."

"My name?"

"You didn't know that you were a guinea pig, did you?" the Black Doctor said.

"I . . . I'm afraid I didn't."

"An unwitting tool, so to speak," the Black Doctor chuckled. "You know, of course, that the Galactic Confederation has been delaying and stalling any action on Hospital Earth's application for full status as one of the Confederation powers and for a seat on the Council. We had fulfilled two criteria for admission without difficulty—we had resolved our problems at home so that we were free from war on our own planet, and we had a talent that is much needed and badly in demand in the Galaxy, a job to do that would fit into the Confederation's organization. But the Confederation has always had a third criterion for its membership . . . a criterion that Hospital Earth could not easily prove or demonstrate."

The Black Doctor smiled. "After all, there could be no place in a true Confederation of Worlds for any one race of people that considered itself superior to all

the rest. No race can be admitted to the Confederation until its members have demonstrated that they are capable of tolerance, willing to accept the members of other races on an equal footing. And it has always been the nature of Earthmen to be intolerant, to assume that one who looks strange and behaves differently must somehow be inferior."

The Black Doctor crossed the room and opened a folder on the desk. "You can read the details some other time, if you like. You were selected by the Galactic Confederation from a thousand possible applicants, to serve as a test case, to see if a place could be made for you on Hospital Earth. No one here was told of your position—not even you—although certain of us suspected the truth. The Confederation wanted to see if a well-qualified, likeable and intelligent creature from another world would be accepted and elevated to equal rank as a Physician with Earthmen."

Dal stared at him. "And I was the one?"

"You were the one. It was a struggle, all right, but Hospital Earth has finally satisfied the Confederation. At the end of this conclave we will be admitted to full membership and given a permanent seat and vote in the Galactic Council. Our probationary period will be over. But enough of that, what about you? What are your plans? What do you propose to do now that you have that Star on your collar?"

They talked then about the future. Tiger Martin had been appointed to the survey crew returning to 31 Brucker VII, at his own request, while Jack was accepting a temporary teaching post in the great Diagnostic Clinic at Hospital Philadelphia. There were a dozen things that Dal had considered, but for the moment he wanted only to travel from medical center to medical center on Hospital Earth, observing and studying in order to decide how he would best like to use his abilities and his position as a Physician from Hospital Earth. "It will be in surgery, of course," he said. "Just where in surgery, or what kind, I don't know just yet. But there will be time enough to decide that."

"Then go along," Dr. Arnquist said, "with my congratulations and blessing. You have taught us a great deal, and perhaps you have learned some things at the same time."

Dal hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded. "I've learned some things," he said, "but there's still one thing that I want to do before I go."

He lifted his little pink friend gently down from his shoulder and rested him in the crook of his arm. Fuzzy looked up at him, blinking his shoe-button eyes happily. "You asked me once to leave Fuzzy with you, and I refused. I couldn't see then how I could possibly do without him; even the thought was frightening. But now I think I've changed my mind."

He reached out and placed Fuzzy gently in the Black Doctor's hand. "I want you to keep him," he said. "I don't think I'll need him any more. I'll miss him, but I think it would be better if I don't have him now. Be good to him, and let me visit him once in a while."

The Black Doctor looked at Dal, and then lifted Fuzzy up to his own shoulder. For a moment the little creature shivered as if afraid. Then he blinked twice at Dal, trustingly, and snuggled in comfortably against the Black Doctor's neck.

Without a word Dal turned and walked out of the office. As he stepped down the corridor, he waited fearfully for the wave of

desolation and loneliness he had felt before when Fuzzy was away from him.

But there was no hint of those desolate feelings in his mind now. And after all, he thought, why should there be? He was not a Garvian any longer. He was a Star Surgeon from Hospital Earth.

He smiled as he stepped from the elevator into the main lobby and crossed through the crowd to the street doors. He pulled his scarlet cape tightly around his throat. Drawing himself up to the full height of which he was capable, he walked out of the building and strode down onto the street.

THE END

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THE IRREALIST

By THOMAS SHARKEY

*A sharp and acrid vignette
of a young writer and a
literary critic, discussing
environment.*

COME in, pull up a box, and sit down," one head said. The other remained silent, calmly smoking a cigarette.

Charlie did as he was told, glancing nervously from one head to the other. It wasn't the man's two heads that bothered him. Charlie had long ago grown used to that phenomenon of modern living.

It was that this man was an appraiser—a literary parasite that fed on the blood of new, unselling writers.

"You're a bit older than I expected," the talkative head was saying. "Are you a *Before* baby?"

Charlie blushed, despite the fact that this was a usual question, in view of his perfect limbs, his single head, his unscarred, unblemished tissues.

"N-no," he stammered. "I was born two years after the blast."

"Really?" The two heads exchanged glances. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to embarrass you. I forgot that—toward the beginning—some couples still were lucky."

Charlie was anxious to get on with it.

"Well, what do you think of

my stories?" he asked.

"Peter has been awake all night reading them. I'd better let him answer that."

"Well," the head called Peter began, "I'm afraid they just won't do. I'm not saying they're without merit. Your characterization is good enough. Your plotting is cohesive and certainly original . . ."

"Well then, what is wrong?"

As in answer, the appraiser strolled over to the window. Outside lay Fifth Avenue, its proud buildings of only 30 years before now reduced to rubble and single-story Quonset huts. The time was Spring, but the sun was all but invisible behind the ever-lingering Black Haze. Young people hopped by on only one leg, or waltzed by on three. Their elders were in no better condition, broken and stooped, the blind leading the blind.

"Obviously you've paid little attention to modern writing or you would have discovered the fault yourself," the head called Peter said, returning his gaze to Charlie. "Look at your stories. Read them over. Every single one: Happy endings! Happy endings!"

the Spectroscope

by S. E. COTTS

SEED OF LIGHT. By Edmund Cooper. 159 pp. Ballantine Books. Paper: 35¢.

Edmund Cooper's latest entry in the science fiction world has much to recommend it. It has some original insights into man and the universe, and it is couched in very beautiful and imaginative language that ought to rank him with the best of our descriptive science fiction writers. Then, too, it is his most ambitious work (indeed it would be hard to imagine a more ambitious one). In 159 pages we see the end of all life on earth, the launching of a starship with five men and five women aboard in a last desperate search for a way to continue the human race, and the passage of some seven or eight centuries before the descendants of the original starship crew find a place that is suitable for human life.

But this very ambitiousness is the reason why Mr. Cooper's book is not really successful. He has attempted a very ticklish problem—perhaps one that is inherent in a book of this nature. That is, how to give a cosmic sweep to a story, to give the sense of an immortality through propagation of the race, and still make an interesting, well-crafted narrative with the proper development of character a novel must have. Clifford Simak's *City* probably comes the closest to a solution of this particular writing problem, but even he had to compromise to a certain extent by making his work a series of interconnected short pieces instead of one long one.

The reader of *Seed of Light* will probably find his attention wandering as generation after generation of people and hopes and ideas pass by. Indeed he may even get a guilty conscience for not being able to care too much in the face of such star-shattering happenings.

The firm hand and fine judgment that Cooper uses in selecting his words and phrases should be extended to his choice of a realizable

goal next time. His current intentions are so great that his results must necessarily disappoint us.

THE WORLD THAT COULDN'T BE. *Edited by H. L. Gold. 288 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc., \$3.95.*

Mr. Gold deserves the gratitude of all science fiction readers. In his latest collection he has brought together nine novelettes of unusually fine quality. In addition to confirming old addicts, this is one volume that is sure to collect a host of new friends for the field.

The stories are outstanding on two levels. For sheer excitement or adventure, it would be very hard to top Simak's title story or Nourse's "Brightside Crossing." The stories by Evelyn Smith, F. L. Wallace, Damon Knight and L. Sprague de Camp are delightful entertainments. The Panghorne, Matheson and Clifton tales are quite moving.

But in addition to these three outstanding traits, all the stories have another aspect, one that is common to all of them. By placing their characters so deftly in their settings, be they exciting or funny or sad, they provide some extremely worthwhile perceptions into the nature of man and his constant adjustments in the face of a world he is striving to understand.

SCIENCE FICTION SHOWCASE. *Edited by Mary Kornbluth. 264 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc. \$3.95.*

It is extremely rare to get a wholly satisfactory anthology. It is more than twice as rare, however, to be privileged to read two in the same month. This one is particularly significant apart from its fine qualities because it is the very finest kind of memorial that one could imagine to the talents of the late C. M. Kornbluth.

Though the stories are of different lengths, from Sturgeon's six pages to Leinster's seventy-five, the bulk of them show a common theme, one that Mr. Kornbluth would have approved of without question. They deal primarily with the search for happiness and meaning, the need for peace and the need to be loved, set against the ever more frantic background of a civilization that has grown just a little too complex to make those desires possible.

Unfortunately, the excellence of these stories only serve to remind us further of the great void that Mr. Kornbluth's death left, since these very qualities I mentioned used to be the ones that were his particular hallmark.





Or so you say

Dear Editor:

I am a hearty fan of s-f. I have been reading *Amazing* for two years. I just finished Mr. Leinster's story "Long Ago, Far Away." It is the best since "The Galaxy Primes." I don't like serials but if that is the only way, I'll take it.

Last February you published "Hunters Out of Time" which, in my opinion, is the best story you have ever published. How about more of Jack Odin?

Bob Anderson
7030 May St.
Chicago 21, Ill.

• *A "Hunters" sequel is being finished by author Kelleam now. We'll bring it to you in the first issue we can get it in.*

Dear Editor:

It is most heartwarming to read modern stories and all the more so to have lived long enough to have seen come to pass the forecasting of past *Amazing Stories*. I can't help but be somewhat amused to read today's "Letters to the Editor" wherein the writer says he has read *Amazing* for a year or so, and goes on therefrom to expound on certain criticisms. This old graybeard started same in 1929 and have been a fan ever since, although this is my first letter.

I have always enjoyed the stories, thoughts and proposals along with the letters. In case you doubt my longevity with *Amazing*, consult your files when "Into the Green Prism" was published.

• *You have convinced us! It's a tribute to be able to keep a reader that long.*

Dear Editor:

After reading the August issue of *Amazing*, I have come to the conclusion that Lloyd Biggle's "Taste of Fire" is one of the best

stories I have ever read. I can't praise it enough. If that is an example of Biggle's work, I want more. The short stories "The Great Beer Plague" and "Contributing Factor" were rather poor although "The Traveling Couch" and "Dolce Al Fine" were fairly good. If *Amazing* would improve its short stories it wouldn't have to worry about competition from any other s-f magazine because your book-length novels are always good and sometimes like the above mentioned, excellent.

John Hitt
4813 No. 28th
Tacoma 7, Wash.

Dear Editor:

I just had to write and tell you how much I enjoyed "Long Ago, Far Away," by Murray Leinster. I thought that "Hunters Out of Time" was the best novel I had ever read, but Mr. Leinster's novel was even better. With a full-length novel in each issue I can hardly wait for *Amazing's* next issue.

Ray Hahn
5524 W. 122nd St.
Hawthorne, Calif.

● *You fellows might like to savor the taste of some of the novels we have in store for you—one by Marion Zimmer Bradley, a "Hunters" sequel by Kelleam, one by Fritz Leiber, and a magnificent story by Ward ("Bring the Jubilee") Moore.*

Dear Editor:

I have been reading s-f for seven years now. That is quite a record because I am only seventeen. *Amazing* has been my favorite s-f magazine since I can remember. I have just sent in a year's subscription. What really sold me was E. E. Smith's "The Galaxy Primes." I do hope there are more to come.

The illustration on the September cover is very good. I think it does something for the respectability of the field to get away from monsters. I don't mind if the hero is not vaguely human but I know many who do. Keep even the nice monsters out of the illustrations and it will help make converts. Please! Please! have the illustrators read the stories *carefully* before they try to illustrate. I am sure many other fans are as fed up with the constant bloopers found in so many illustrations. The best feature of the September issue is that these bloopers are conspicuous in their absence. I am hoping it will remain that way.

I would like to know where Richard Sabia got his idea for "The Premiere." I detect a similarity to an idea advanced by another very prominent writer. In my opinion it is better worked out here.

Your new subscriber

Jacqueline Brice

2843 Van Buren

Alameda, California

● *No monsters, no bloopers—and no fair asking authors where they get their ideas. Most of them don't even know, for sure, themselves. Welcome aboard, Jackie!*

Dear Editor:

Murray Leinster has always been one of my favorites and his "Long Ago, Far Away" was one of the best stories I've read in some time. Once I started it I couldn't put it down until I'd reached the end. Soames had a real problem there, modern Earth came first of course, but he couldn't have let those children's parents die. Those kids were just too nice for that. As in any Leinster yarn the gadgets and ideas in this one were really fine, the idea of time travel violating the conservation of energy-mass law is something to think about and the descriptions of mountains of meteoric matter from the smashed Fifth Planet were worth the price of admission on their own. It gives one something to think about when the moon rises at night.

I for one really enjoyed this. I hope that it is only the first of many Leinster stories coming up in *Amazing*.

James S. Veldman

910 Elgin Ave.

Forest Park, Ill.

● *We have another Leinster coming up in Fantastic Science Fiction Stories, Amazing's sister magazine.*

Dear Editor:

I began reading your magazine for "The Galaxy Primes" serial by Dr. E. E. Smith, which I liked very much.

This month however, the story "The Premiere," by Richard Sabia struck me as the best piece of fiction I have yet seen in your magazine.

If you continue to present material of such high calibre you may count on me, among many others, to buy every issue of your magazine with high anticipation.

I certainly hope to see stories of comparable quality in your future issues; and you can be sure you'll hear from me again if I don't.

Paul Matthews
409 McKinley Ave.
San Antonio 10, Texas

• *Both are welcome—your patronage and your comments. If top-notch stories will keep you reading Amazing, you have no excuse for stopping.*

Dear Editor:

I am wondering whether you employed a motivational researcher to paint the cover for the September issue of *Amazing*. Seems to me I've been depth-probed; for my first impression of the cover ran something like this: *to see it is to buy it*. Which, of course, I did.

Now I might have become somewhat indignant at having been so flagrantly "taken"—had not the contents behind the cover proven to be just as appealing and satisfying as the cover itself. Which, of course, they did.

Murray Leinster takes top honors this issue with "Long Ago, Far Away." And I find myself comparing Lloyd Biggle's "First Love" with the recent "The Stars Are Calling, Mr. Keats" for its sensitive treatment of human reactions to "other people, other places."

Bobby Gene Warner
745 Eldridge St.
Orlando, Florida

• *No "hidden persuaders"—just a darn good artist!*

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